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ELECTRONIC CAFÉ: TECHNOLOGICAL COUNTERPUBLICITY

Federal elections, Olympic ceremonies, the actions of a unit of sharpshooters, a theater premiere—all count as public events. Other events of overwhelming significance, such as child-rearing, factory work, and watching television within one's own four walls, are considered private. The real social experiences of human beings, produced in everyday life and work cut across such divisions. —Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *The Public Sphere and Experience*¹

Hosted by the city of Los Angeles, the 1984 Olympics was a peculiar mix of ritual celebrations of human achievement and harmony, spectacular displays of technological prowess, and omnipresent corporate sponsorship (a first in the history of the Games), pointedly animating the struggle that is the public sphere. The highly publicized pomp and circumstance of brotherhood and progress clashed with the socioeconomic realities and perceptions of a deeply segregated city and its constituencies. At the height of the Reagan-era's conservative backlash, neoliberalism's utopia promised greater freedom and liberty through increased privatization in terms of free markets and corporate control, as well as personalized forms of labor, leisure, and responsibility.² The public sphere and its apparatuses of publicity do not exclude the private but rather organize it as part of an overall experience, socially binding and economically viable. As discussed in the previous chapter, Los Angeles, the “city of the future,” had long been a site of such organization, where urban development meant

the bulldozing, displacement, and defunding of entire neighborhoods in the name of common progress and the violent marginalization of communities and their (self-)perception in relation to the nexus of hegemonic values, behaviors, and imaginaries. The public sphere comprises such organization and relationality, along with contradictions between ideals, expectations, and everyday life. Again, it is a site of struggle over psychological, emotional, ideological, and technological conditions as much as material conditions. Negt and Kluge's words (previously cited in this book's introduction) are worth repeating: "The public sphere denotes specific institutions and practices (e.g., public authority, the press, public opinion, the public, publicity work, streets, and public places); it is, however, also a general horizon of social experience, the summation of everything that is, in reality or allegedly, relevant for all members of society. In this sense publicity is, on the one hand, a matter for a handful of professionals (e.g., politicians, editors, officials), on the other, something that concerns everyone and realizes itself only in people's minds, a dimension of their consciousness."³

With *Electronic Café* (figure 3.1), Mobile Image chose to participate in this contest over what (and who) is perceived as relevant to society. Their third major project modeled a different kind of utopia, one forged precisely by engaging the contradictions manifested by the dynamics of public and private life. Modeling a reflexive and critical form of fantasy, the work culminated the group's past decade of research and experimentation, fully realizing a heterogeneous, self-organized counterpublic experience.

Electronic Café linked public locations in five very different Los Angeles neighborhoods: South Central (now called South LA), East LA, Koreatown, Venice Beach, and Downtown LA (figure 3.2). Each site in this "telecollaborative network" was equipped with an array of communication devices that were futuristic for the time—a computer messaging system, searchable text and pictorial databases, image exchange and audio-conferencing equipment, slow-scan television cameras, digital writing and drawing tablets, and high-resolution printers—all made available to local residents. Visitors could post messages and images, participate in conversations, appropriate and manipulate material from both mainstream media and users at other café sites, record and archive memories,

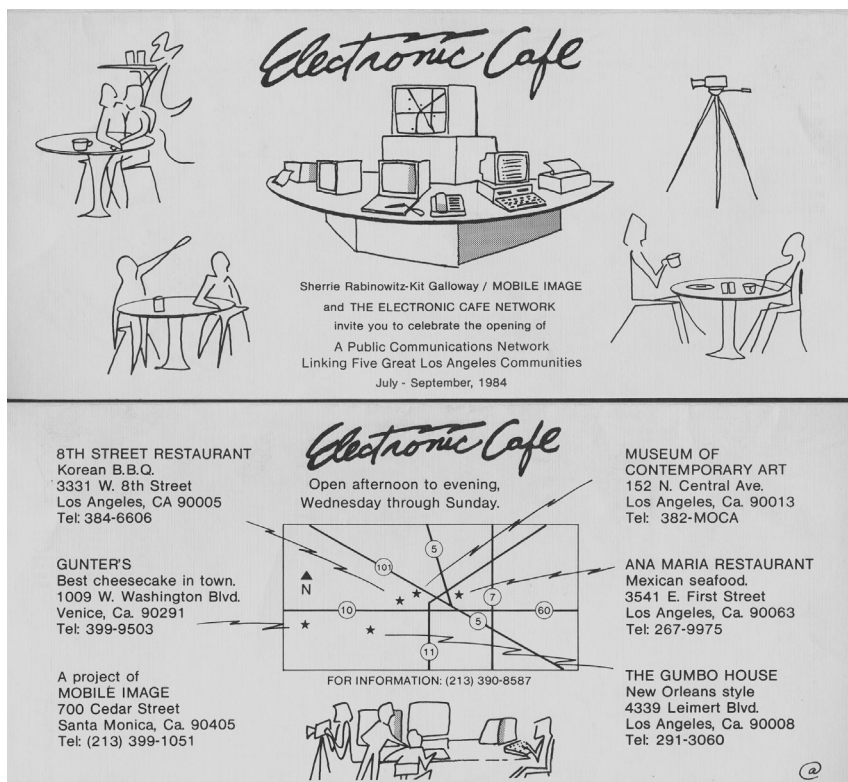


histories, and encounters, and search and retrieve contributions from the expanding database. Operating six hours a day for seven weeks, the project encouraged participants to use state-of-the-art telecommunication technologies to engage critically the material and immaterial connections and divisions that existed across this notoriously sprawling and fragmented city.

Connecting four geographically, culturally, and ethnically distinct neighborhoods and a public art institution through such technologies, *Electronic Café* was a fully fleshed-out model of critical and productive fantasy in Negt and Kluge's sense of the term. Rather than offer a spectacular vision of a fanciful alternative reality divorced from established

3.1

Mobile Image, *Electronic Café*, Ana Maria site (East LA), 1984. Courtesy Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive.



3.2

Mobile Image, announcement card for
Electronic Café, 1984. Courtesy Rabinowitz/
Galloway Archive.

norms and limits, this fantasy is built upon those very norms and limits, along with the histories, conditions, and latencies that determine and are determined by them. Inspiring a form of imaginative speculation that is confined to neither sweeping progressivist ideals nor hyper-personalized dreams, *Electronic Café* enabled the formation of temporary, overlapping, substantive relations that linked the apparent incompatibilities of social and individual experience, of public and private. The technologies used and shared did not romantically transcend the city's and its population's divisions, and yet the project also did not succumb to merely reiterating structures of dissociation and confinement. In many ways, the work took as its point of departure the constraints or limitations recognized through or consciously built into *Satellite Arts* and *Hole in Space*. In the former, through its lags and glitches, televised dancers remained visibly tethered to their physical bodies and spaces, showing that there is no autonomous "third" space, that although not confined to its corporeal limits, being and experience are always already mediated. *Satellite Arts* also made palpable the difference between broadcasting and communication at those moments when the televisual encounter was more than an individual unidirectional extension into the electronic ether. *Hole in Space*, in turn, put to the test Mobile Image's vision of a "public telecommunications sculpture," demonstrating the limits of "the public sphere" as a place for the autonomous and productive discursive encounter among informed citizens. Although situated in urban outdoor space, the coast-to-coast audiovisual interaction was weighed down by the increasing privatization of experience, both commercially and individually. The work's nuances—its pointedly chosen and juxtaposed sites of high culture (Lincoln Center) and blatant consumerism (Broadway Mall); the screens' allusions to public service announcement, entertainment, and shopping windows; the reduction of electronic encounter to the spectacular performance of stereotypical behaviors and exchange of personal messages—seemed to illustrate Negt and Kluge's claim that, on many levels, the public sphere is "the aggregate of individual spheres that are only abstractly related."⁴

Electronic Café was conceived and realized in the midst of early 1980s debates regarding material and immaterial ownership, access, and participation at a moment of deep suspicion toward all forms of collective agency. Neoliberal ideology had bastardized and institutionalized the

anti-authoritarian and decentralizing impulses of the 1960s emancipation movements, while the 1970s financial crisis was presented as a failure of municipal and state fiscal discipline, ushering in wage freezes, cutbacks in social and public services, and, most crucially, an economic and ideological swing toward private funding and initiatives. As David Harvey observed, these tendencies, in the United States and elsewhere, culminated in deregulated and crude forms of wealth and power distribution, including the commodification of land and labor, the “suppression of rights to the common,” and (neo)colonial and imperialist “processes of appropriation of assets,” under the guise of “liberty” and “freedom.”⁵ The questions of who owns the tools of creation and destruction and to what ends and in whose interest are they wielded were of utmost concern. Under these circumstances, technological innovation and increased personalized access to the media, whether through a steadily growing plethora of cable television channels or the introduction of the personal computer, were slated toward personal consumption in niche markets rather than social labor, and participation in society was largely reduced to the competitive private ownership of commodities, be they things, ideas, or identities.

Yet, the postmodern condition also begat, or demanded, the productive reconsideration of histories and perspectives that would challenge the logic of late capitalism as the necessary outcome of the turmoil caused by domestic and international liberation and social movements, along with the hegemony of modernist notions of growth, productivity, and selfhood. Feminist and critical race theorists such as Donna Haraway and bell hooks advocated for strategic subject positionings outside of binary identity structures, while philosophers such as Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner were “rethinking the public sphere,” “the mass public and the mass subject,” and Negt and Kluge’s seminal ideas concerning counterpublic resistance and the persistence of class-based exploitation were translated, circulated, and discussed in prominent art and academic journals.⁶ Urbanists, including Raul Villa, Rosalyn Deutsche, and Edward Soja, traced the fight over urban imaginaries in US metropolises through mapping, zoning, and spatial design as devices of social control; Manuel Castells and Saskia Sassen pondered the overlapping and interdependent spheres of technological-information networks and the geographic-material flow of bodies, goods, and services.⁷ Along with Suzanne Lacy,

ASCO, and others discussed previously, artists such as Ulysses Jenkins engaged LA-specific struggles over psycho-geographic territory and the media as an apparatus of framing and managing discursive and performative space. In 1982, following the efforts of feminist artists in (then) new media, Sylvia Harvey advocated for a reconsideration of avant-garde models of artistic production rooted in the belief in socialism as a viable political option, in “scientific thinking” as a critical-artistic practice, and in the validity of creating a Leftist popular culture, notions distrusted or outright rejected in canonical Cold War art histories.⁸

As they progressed in their work, Galloway and Rabinowitz’s plans for *Electronic Café* were increasingly driven by similar questions of social transformation, the politicization of technology as apparatuses of production and distribution, and the potential of redefining critical collective engagement. They were concerned with ownership of ideas and information, access to devices and networks, and the usefulness of their project as an experiment or model of social and ideological innovation. The artists were keenly aware of the difference between symbolic (and commercial) novelty and substantive change in relationality—the way in which individual and social subjects frame and organize their connections and experiences with and of one another and their environment through technology/tools. In their archive, a folder titled “EC Original Development Materials” includes notes collected during planning sessions and discussions with peers and collaborators in 1983. In one section, Galloway and Rabinowitz acknowledge: “What is feasible technically, however, is a very different question from what is socially and institutionally feasible. For example, much of the application of information tech results in decentralization and often a flattening of the hierarchy of power. Desirable though this may seem in theory, in practice it ignores 2 realities. Many people, through instinct, education or attitude do not relish responsibility, while others may prefer to retain their positions of power in their status quo.”⁹ A list they compiled under the title “Philosophy/Value System” includes the following:

- What constitutes the public interest?
- Distinguishing between public and private information.
- Distinguishing between free and restricted information.
- How will success or failure of prototype affect general public attitude?

Who is the audience, what is the public dividend, what is the product being sold and to whom?

Can this demonstrate that human effectiveness can be enhanced via man-computer communication?

The democratic process?

Will the prototype accelerate the extension of experimental methods

Transform individual intelligence and social effectiveness?

The real issue is that of allowing access to the whole picture of what is going on.

It takes more than mere electronics to make a network function.

And some of the “issues” they explicitly planned to address with *Electronic Café* include:

Information rich—information poor

Autonomous realities

Communities of Consciousness

human scale—technological scale

privacy and electronic invasion

art in a technological society

healthy technological models and prototype

cross-cultural communication

appropriate technologies

survival skill in an information-intensive environment

aesthetics research¹⁰

Although Galloway and Rabinowitz did not couch their project in the traditional language of class antagonism, their philosophy, inquiry, and practice recalls Negt and Kluge’s examination of the history of the public sphere through the lens of ownership, production, and distribution. As Fredric Jameson points out, Negt and Kluge use the term “proletarian” in its most general sense (and as an attribute rather than the designation of a social entity): “Proletarian, i.e., separated from the means of production, designates not merely the labor characteristics of the industrial proletariat, but all similarly restricted productive capacities.”¹¹ The latter include the making of ideas, narratives, and identities, and, crucially, the

transformation of potential futures through latent past and present experiences. Labor includes material and immaterial production and reproduction, development as well as maintenance work in all spheres: public, private, and otherwise, begetting questions of value, interest, and usefulness of such work for particular constituencies and publics in relation to the general horizon and to one another. Negt and Kluge emphasize the political need to employ what seemed to be outmoded terms:

The word *proletarian* has . . . taken on an attenuated, indeed an anachronistic sense. Yet the real conditions it denotes belong to the present, and there is no other word for them. We believe it is wrong to allow words to become obsolete before there is a change in the objects they denote. . . . It is not our intention as individuals to replace historically evolved key concepts that denote unsublated real circumstances and do not have a purely definitional character. The fashioning of new concepts is a matter of collective effort. If historical situations really change, then new words come about too.¹²

Sanctioned by modernist myths of progress and humanism, innovations in technology and consumption often (poorly) mask, and even further entrench, the ongoing divisions between those who have the power to wield the tools of perception and subjectivity effectively in a regulatory and profitable manner and those who do not. And although, as will be discussed, *Electronic Café* was conceived to entice its publics' productive imaginations with a then-futuristic-looking design, the artists were aware of the fact that what needed to change were the processes of production and utility rather than just the devices employed. As they put it, "In the end the technology used to supply the means of communication doesn't really matter."¹³ Neither art nor technology should be functioning as symbolic liberation from ideology, as commodities making up for a lack of or blocking, in Negt and Kluge's words, "any genuine coherence" between what is otherwise conveniently differentiated between public and private, between what is designated as relevant to (and thus to be complied by and aspired to) society as a totality and what is relegated as being of merely private, meaning personal interest, the latter affecting any and all of those experiences that cannot be subsumed under the prevalent images and performances of normative bodies, needs, and actions.¹⁴

Recalling the traditional avant-garde's rallying cry of reconnecting art and life, image and experience, Mobile Image essentially provided a technique of aesthetics akin to what Boris Arvatov had termed "socialist objects." Writing in the early 1920s, Arvatov expressed his admiration for the technical development and industrial production under capitalism, but he was also highly critical of the kind of things made available to its masses. In order to achieve a truly popular culture (one not made *for* but *by* the people) that would unite the ideal and the everyday, the public and the private, both the means of production and the objects produced would have to cease to be commodities, hence, things containing symbolically what was actually lacking, gratifying only superficially real existing needs. Arvatov advocated a new "culture of things" to overcome the dualism of *bytie* ("associated with the spiritual, the literary, and the transcendent") and *byt* ("the mute, material, and tradition-bound"), a binary dynamic that was a historical artifact of class division, wherein the concept of consumption was created in opposition to that of labor.¹⁵ A proletarian culture would break down this dualism through the "active agency of socialist things": rather than commodities—passive objects that serve as *substitutes* for relations between producers, things, and world—socialist objects would be tools animated by their use value for social labor (rather than by exchange value and private-property relations) responding "to the social needs of the everyday life of [the] historical moment."¹⁶ Crucially, given Mobile Image's concern with both communication and its products/outcome (along the aforementioned lines of Negt and Kluge's definition of proletarian), the socialist objects at stake in 1984 included not only the technical equipment made available but also ideas, norms, dreams, histories, and subjectivities *as technologies*—that is, as devices constructed and wielded in relation to and by power, and subject to struggles over ownership. A futuristic, or rather "fantastic," use of telecommunication technologies would have to yield more than a reproduction of existing subject positions and (material and immaterial) property relations. Simply connecting urban neighborhoods and communities with technical gadgets would not suffice. As Galloway and Rabinowitz's put it in their 1983 Olympic Arts proposal for *Electronic Café*: "Though the real relevance of satellite communication is crossing oceans—connecting cultures and nations—serious questions are now being asked about the notions of 'free flow information.' For as many developing nations rightly

perceive, the flip side of the ‘free-flow’ is cultural imperialism. Will extending the reach of communication technology really promote greater understanding and communication, or will it only accelerate the rate of cultural homogenization already attributed to television? Up to now, the free flow of information has been a one way street.”¹⁷

A counterpublic or proletarian technology would have to offer a new organization of experience. It would have to model the making of a new contingent yet historically rooted social horizon, a new positioning of subjects, perspectives, and knowledge, utilized not as a substitute for an existing aesthetics and technics, politics and economics of experience, but built on the expansion of the given in order to transform its very logic, of the relationality of the public and the private, the total and the partial. According to Haraway, such a technology would have to grapple with the problem of how “to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world.”¹⁸ As the production, dissemination, and utility of information and desires, telecommunications will not “solve” the seemingly irresolvable conundrum of the general horizon (or institutionalized knowledge and apparatuses as prescribed objectivity) and the multiplicity of the local and of critically postmodernist difference. Yet, Haraway argues, “we do need an earthwide network of connections, including the ability to translate knowledges among very different—and power-differentiated—communities.” We need to know “how meanings and bodies get made . . . in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life.”¹⁹ If the public sphere is traditionally discursive and everyday life is performative, then counterpublicity is both: language and embodiment.

Electronic Café provided its users with narratives and images, verbal and written conversation as well as visual and sensory expression and exchange—keyboards, writing pads, and databases; mass media pictures, recorded performances, and drawings. To Haraway, vision is key because of its embodiment, and especially when the “instruments of visualization” can connect and organize “situated knowledges” outside the binary logic of relativism and totalization. No knowledge or horizon is total, and the disembodied eye of modern culture, with its comfortable and controlling

view from above, is a powerful technology of prescriptive public sight. Like Haraway, Mobile Image looked not for an accumulation of “more real” or “truer” experiences on the ground, a privileging of the “vantage points of the subjugated”; there are no “innocent” perspectives, only already mediated ones.²⁰ Proletarian publicity means to learn *how* to see from embodied positions, from those partial and emphatically located perspectives that use technology for the fantastic exchange and organization of new and evolving collective experiences. The politics and technics of seeing in *Electronic Café*—of sourcing, manipulating, and creating images; of sending back and forth notes, poems, and anecdotes; of collecting and constructing perspectives, histories, and artifacts, stored and accessed under old and new categories in an electronic, accessible archive—presaged Haraway’s “doctrine and practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing.” Public and private, the generally prescriptive and the regulatory in particular, are intimately interwoven: “All these pictures of the world should not be allegories of infinite mobility and interchangeability but of elaborate specificity and difference and the loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another’s point of view, even when the other is our own machine.”²¹ Learning how to see, to understand and wield one’s own standpoint as a technology of positioning and being positioned, and to experience and strategically employ the continuous partiality of subjecthood in order to create new vantage points, chart new territories, and build new solidarities, these were the goals of *Electronic Café*. Fantasy—again, in Negt and Kluge’s sense of the term, as the productive alignment of specific social needs and desires, critical consciousness, and the outside world—was the organizing force of a technological counterpublic experience in which the city of Los Angeles became a site of struggle over territory, imagination, self, and community.

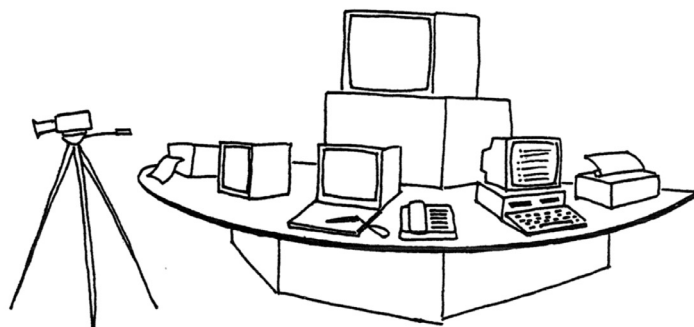
ELECTRONIC CAFÉ

Electronic Café was part of the Olympic Arts Festival, a citywide celebration of “international brotherhood” meant to exemplify the spirit of the Olympic Games.²² Sponsored by the Times Mirror Company, the ten-week event

included more than four hundred works by artists and performance companies from every continent and was emblemized by Robert Graham's monumental neoclassical *Olympic Gateway*, a post-and-lintel structure topped by two bronze nudes, commissioned for the entrance to the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. According to Director (and then Cal Arts President) Robert Fitzpatrick, the festival was conceived "with a Greek verb and a promise. The verb is *thaumadzo*—to be seized with wonder, to experience awe, to be surprised and to take delight in discovery." As Fitzpatrick explains, the festival was based on the premise that "art is not a form of propaganda but an instrument of truth, an opportunity to put aside differences and rejoice in being alive," and participating countries explicitly agreed not to "preach."²³ Promotional materials gathered by Galloway and Rabinowitz in advance of their project reiterated the message of art as an agent of global harmony, declaring that "the arts belong to everyone" and that "in an increasingly multicultural society, the arts provide a universal language, a bridge of illumination that connects all of us."²⁴

Electronic Café was unusual in its confrontation with the relational politics of identity, place, and space in present-day Los Angeles. Although its focus on exciting new forms of cross-cultural exchange may have seemed compatible with the goals of the Olympic Arts Festival, as well as the games themselves, it distinguished itself amid a citywide spectacle that promoted supposedly universal classical principles but generally avoided—and arguably distracted from—the real conditions of the city as a site of economic, social, and political struggle. In a letter supporting Mobile Image's proposal to the festival, Samuel Mark, Acting Director of USC Institute for Hispanic Media and Culture, recognized this distinction: "The 'Electronic Café' has my enthusiastic support for two principal reasons. One, that it will reach some of the many different ethnic communities that compose our City, and two, that it utilizes computer-video installations in an innovative and artistic way. With the exception of the 'Electronic Café' and very few other presentations, I am extremely disappointed with the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival because its organizers have not done enough to reach and represent the Hispanic community and other communities, nor to present innovative cultural manifestations."²⁵

Mobile Image designed *Electronic Café* simultaneously to inspire future imagining and to place such imagining in dialogue with the



present. At each locational node, the available telecommunication equipment was set within a self-contained semicircular console (figure 3.3), whose streamlined, monochrome design and precise arrangement of devices—several small monitors and workstations below, with a large screen overhead—evoked control panels featured in countless science-fiction movies and television shows. Yet, Mobile Image took care to prevent its sci-fi aesthetics and machinery from operating in isolation: the network was emphatically grounded in the specificity of the sites that comprised it—the various neighborhoods of Los Angeles, the identity labels conventionally affixed to them, and the particular establishments in which the futuristic consoles were installed. Four of the five locations were restaurants (figure 3.4), selected by local residents collaborating with the artists because those establishments were firmly rooted in their respective communities. The East LA node was installed in Ana Maria, an “all-Mexican” family restaurant, with waitresses wearing traditional dresses and with murals featuring colonial architecture.²⁶ South LA’s was located in the Gumbo House (figure 3.5), a Cajun restaurant catering mainly to the local Black population. Koreatown’s was in the 8th Street Restaurant,

3.3

Mobile Image, diagram of console for
Electronic Café, c.1984. Courtesy Rabinowitz/
Galloway Archive.



The ELECTRONIC CAFE Restaurants



The Gumbo House, South Central Los Angeles



Ana Maria's, East LA



8th Street Restaurant, Koreatown



Gunters, The Beach Community of Venice



The Museum of Contemporary Art, Downtown

3.4

Mobile Image, *Electronic Café*, photo sheet with sign and five locations, Los Angeles, 1984. Courtesy Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive.



described by artist-participant Hye-Sook Park as “a very rural, Korean-only restaurant.”²⁷ The Venice Beach location was Günter’s, a bohemian eatery modeled on the traditional coffeehouse and intended, according to its owner, as “a forum for the arts and serious political discussion” (figure 3.6).²⁸ *Electronic Café* encouraged users to observe and consider the relations between the immediate social reality of their locations and the technological apparatus at hand. The fifth location, set in an open gallery space in the Museum of Contemporary Art (figure 3.7) and housing the network’s central database, linked such realities to the very cultural institutions that maintain and are maintained by them.

Mobile Image also consciously limited themselves to then-current technological capabilities. The fantastic devices that comprised *Electronic*

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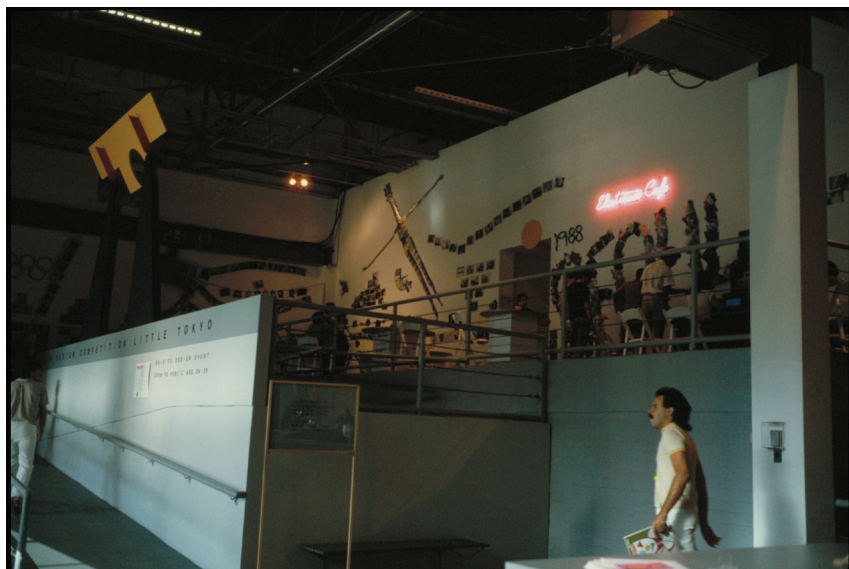
Mobile Image, *Electronic Café*, Gumbo House site (South LA), 1984. Courtesy Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive.



Café were state of the art but not speculative; despite their technical know-how, the artists chose to employ off-the-shelf equipment and “narrowband” networking via preexisting telephone lines rather than build new prototypes that would not be available for years (figure 3.8). Nonetheless, most of the featured equipment was still relatively unfamiliar to the general public. (*Electronic Café* excluded fax machines because they were already integrated into corporate America and thus came with preset procedures and connotations.) The point was to allow users to participate actively in the development of the still-unformed protocols and parameters of emergent technologies without getting overly distracted by or enamored with the machinery itself. Mobile Image also carefully constructed the consoles so that the complexity of the devices—the elaborate wiring and networking mechanisms—would be largely invisible, rendering the system as user-friendly as possible (figure 3.9). As Rabinowitz explained, visitors “were confronted with about \$70,000 worth of equipment in each café, but the technology was transparent enough that they came away with the quality of the human experience they had.”²⁹ Each location also had an artist-in-residence and engineer-in-residence with existing

3.6

Mobile Image, *Electronic Café*. Left:
8th Street Restaurant site (Korea Town);
right: Günter’s site (Venice Beach), 1984.
Courtesy Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive.

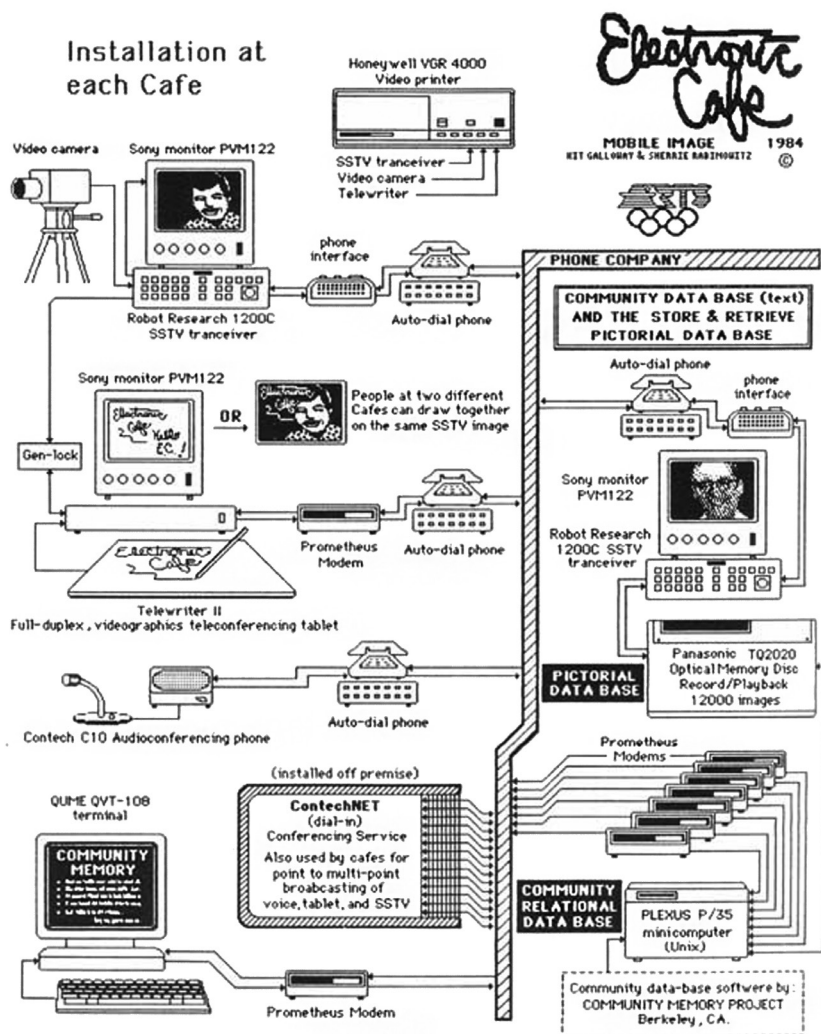


ties to the local community and the technical know-how to demonstrate the capabilities of the network, encourage participants to improvise, and help when things did not function as planned (figure 3.10). The complexity of the system—composed of high-tech devices not designed to work together—meant that lag times, periodic breakdowns, and interruptions were inevitable, and the management of such malfunctions was considered part of the work and its collaborative research model.

Undergirding *Electronic Café* was a customized network built in collaboration with the Community Memory Project, a nonprofit collective of Berkeley-based computer scientists and engineers that, over the previous decade, had been developing what they called a “decentralized, community-controlled communications system.” This system would

3.7

Mobile Image, *Electronic Café*, Museum of Contemporary Art site, 1984. Courtesy Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive.



3.8

Mobile Image, *Electronic Café* setup diagram, 1984, Courtesy Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive.



serve as “an alternative to the highly centralized information delivery by the mass communications media, which tell everybody what a few people have to say, and don’t give you a chance to talk back, to talk to each other.” Merging computer technologies with the politics of public access and engagement, they proclaimed that such a system could facilitate “a future in our own terms.”³⁰ In 1973, the collective established the first public bulletin board system (BBS), consisting of three terminals at different locations—a record shop, a hardware store, and a branch of the San Francisco Public Library—connected via modem to a central mainframe computer (figure 3.11). Each terminal functioned as its own independent, interactive database, enabling users to input and retrieve information and messages according to their own needs. Operational for fourteen months, the BBSs were used extensively by local residents—for everything from carpools to restaurant recommendations to political dialogues—many of

3.9

Mobile Image, *Electronic Café*, various locations, 1984. Courtesy Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive.



whom had never operated a computer before. As its developers noted, the experiment “showed that the public at large, without prior training, can use an electronic information exchange system to define and meet their own information needs.” At the same time, those developers recognized that a network of dispersed public “nodes”—although unfeasible at the time—would greatly expand the project’s potential.³¹ In 1982 and 1983, they fully theorized such a network; by 1984, they were ready to construct it (figure 3.12).

Galloway and Rabinowitz closely followed this development, and in preparation for *Electronic Café*, they compiled and annotated a host of Community Memory documents as source material. Their archived notes

3.10

The *Electronic Café* team in front of Günter’s, 1984. Courtesy Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive.



show that they were as interested in the techno-politics of Community Memory—its potential to reorganize relationships between individuals and community, private and public—as they were in its technical innovations. Under the heading “ADVANTAGES,” Galloway hand copied select passages (marked here in bold) from a 1982 booklet called *The Community Memory Project: An Introduction* (figure 3.13):

Community Memory is a system for the **public management of public information**. It is an open channel for community communications and information exchange, and a way for people with common interests to find each other. It is a **shared community filing cabinet**. It is a tool **for collective thinking, planning, organizing, fantasizing, and decision making**.

3.11

Community Memory terminal at Leopold's Records, Berkeley, California, c.1975.



Community Memory seeks to present **an alternative to broadcast media** such as TV. The nightly national TV news—both commentary and commercials—gives people the “word” from on high, telling us “that’s the way it is.” Community Memory is different. It makes room for **the exchange of people-to-people information**, recognizing and legitimizing the ability of **people to decide for themselves what information they want**.

A community Memory node might also be shared by people who are working on some common project in different parts of the country—the **“community” here would not mean one geographic locality, but would represent a community of common interests**.

3.12

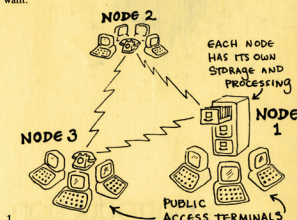
Community Memory group. Left to right: Carl Farrington, Michael Rossman, Phil Kohn, Lee Felsenstine, Karen Paulsell, unidentified, Ken Constad, 1984.

I. What is Community Memory?

Community Memory is a system for the public management of public information. It is an open channel for community communications and information exchange, and a way for people with common interests to find each other. It is a shared community filing cabinet. It is a tool for collective thinking, planning, organizing, fantasizing, and decision-making.

The Community Memory system gives people a place to store and label information, which can then be selected, sorted, and fished out as needed. All the information in the Community Memory is put in directly by the people who use the system: anyone can post messages, read any of the other communications that are there, and add comments or suggestions at any time.

By being open and interactive, Community Memory seeks to present an alternative to broadcast media such as TV. The nightly national TV news – both commentary and commercials – gives people the “word” from on high, telling us “that’s the way it is.” Community Memory is different. It makes room for the exchange of people-to-people information, recognizing and legitimizing the ability of people to decide for themselves what information they want.



The Community Memory system is a network of small computers with large memories, each connected to 10-20 computer terminals. These terminals are for direct public use. People can type in messages with a typewriter-like keyboard and get messages either displayed on a TV screen or printed out on paper.

Each set of terminals around one computer with memory storage is called a “node”. In each node, the terminals are all hooked up together and any information in the node can be taken out through any terminal. As the Community Memory network grows, nodes will be interconnected into larger groupings as part of a regional or national network.

The projected incarnation of Community Memory is a broad dispersion of computer terminals in public places, such as community centers, libraries, stores and bus stations. A Community Memory node might also be shared by people who are working on some common project in different parts of the country – the “community” here would not mean one geographic locality, but would represent a community of common interests.

II. Why Community Memory?

The designers of Community Memory would like to see a world not broken up into nation-states or corporate states, but one built upon many overlapping regions of concern: from household to neighborhood to interest group or work group, from geographical region to globe, where decisions are made by all those affected. This would be a world where power is distributed and governance is the process of collectively trying to determine the best action to be taken, via general discussion and complete dissemination of information. With this vision, the Community Memory system has been designed to be a communications tool for a working democracy.

The purpose of Community Memory is therefore to support the direct and unmediated exchange of information among individuals and groups. The system is designed for communications and collective planning and decision-making, rather than for accounting, statistical analysis, or general office tasks. Community Memory could be used to form libraries, prepare newsletters, and aid the planning, decision-making, and day-to-day work of federations,

The designers of Community Memory would like to see a world not broken up into nation-states or corporate states, **but one built upon many overlapping regions of concern**: from household to neighborhood to interest group or work group, from geographical region to globe, where decisions are made by all those affected.

As **an accessible, non-hierarchical and interactive public medium**, Community Memory will be **unique among current communications systems**. It has certain **similarities to pay telephones, public libraries, radio talk shows, and bulletin boards**, but it has the potential for being **a far more powerful tool than any of these**.

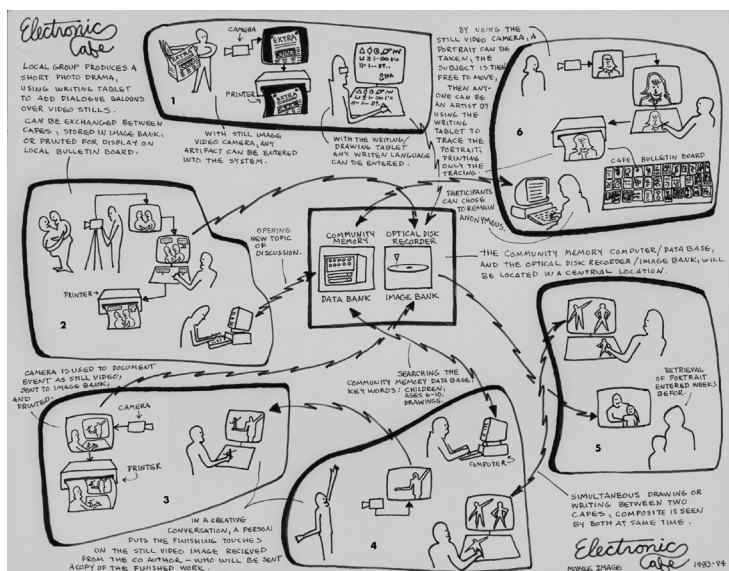
3.13

The Community Memory Project: An Introduction (from Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive), 1982.

A community can be a geographic, economic, cultural, political or recreational entity. By helping its users connect to others who share their interests and concerns, Community Memory can strengthen people's involvements in **many overlapping communities and help them work together toward common goals.**³²

Early in 1984, Mobile Image began collaborating with the Community Memory engineers, who shared their text-based framework and helped incorporate an optical-disk database into it (figure 3.14).³³ The *Electronic Café* platform thus enabled users to post both text and pictures that could subsequently be retrieved and commented upon by other users (figure 3.15). The result was a cumulative, searchable archive that could serve as a space for public interaction and identity formation according to the particular needs of the user—not as an autonomous individual but rather as a social being with shareable concerns. It functioned as a site for collecting alternate histories and inaugurating fresh forms of political organization, enabled by Community Memory's customizable, thematically based filing scheme that could accommodate a potentially limitless multiplicity and combination of ideas and issues—high and low, public and private. The system came with a set of preprogrammed general “index words” (e.g., “music,” “food,” “sex”) and additional words geared toward historically specific local and trans-local concerns (e.g., “housing,” “nuclear,” “women”), but it was also enriched by any number of user-generated categories entered on-site. Examples of these categories included “media for peace,” “American Regime,” “the life of a refugee,” “transsexual rights,” and “what it takes to be in the public.” In this way, the network enabled new social formations via common and negotiated values and interests beyond preconstructed labels. It presented opportunities to produce heterogeneous relations and to recognize the power of doing so.

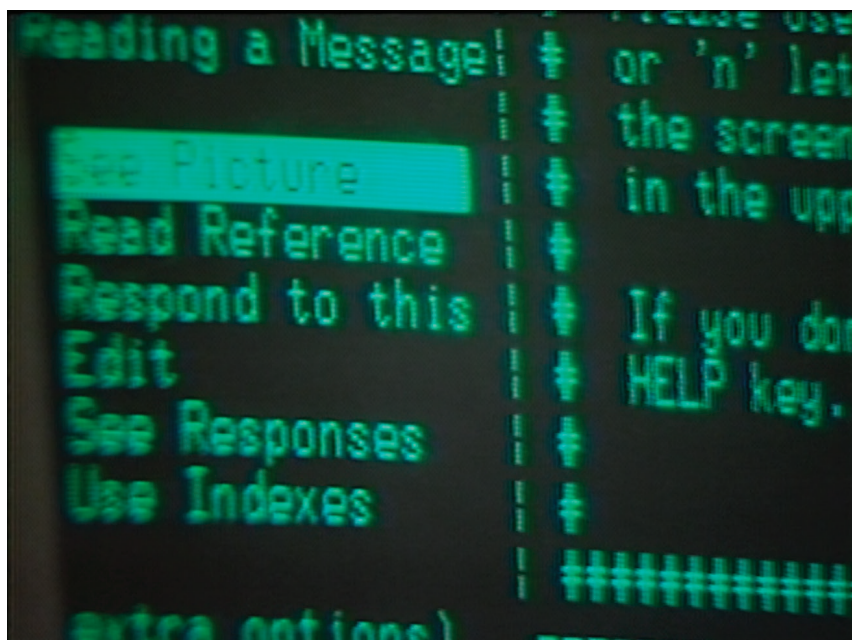
While demonstrating the sociopolitical potential of such relations, Mobile Image was concerned that new communication technologies were increasingly assumed to be inherently emancipatory, that the public was succumbing to the image of a spectacular future enabled by frictionless flows of information, decentralized authority, and de-territorialized relations. What was once tied to the military-industrial complex was now linked to utopian dreams of freedom achievable because of a “communications revolution.”³⁴ As Fred Turner has chronicled, by the early 1970s,



technology was increasingly seen as a social and emotional remedy: if industry and government made people “psychologically fragmented specialists, the technology-induced experience of togetherness would allow them to become both self-sufficient and whole once again.”³⁵ By the mid-1980s, this mindset was pervasive. As Gene Youngblood noted at the time, new technologies promised to “invert the structure and function of mass media (a) from centralized output to decentralized input, (b) from hierarchy to heterarchy, (c) from mass audience to special audience, (d) from communication to conversation, (e) from commerce to community, (f) from nationstate to global village.”³⁶ Mobile Image was highly skeptical of this promise, even as they advanced the possibility for social transformation. This ambivalence was shared by their Community Memory

3.14

Mobile Image, *Electronic Café* network diagram, with Community Memory and optical disk recorder in the center, 1984. Courtesy Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive.



collaborators, who were conscious of the fact that, in the decade since their earliest experiments, public attitudes toward such technologies had generally morphed from suspicion and hesitation to uncritical embrace. In a 1983 newsletter, the Community Memory Project explicitly warned of the dangers of growing “‘computerphilia’: the notion that pushing a few keys on a terminal will liberate people, make their jobs more interesting, expand their information horizons, and give them unlimited powers”³⁷ The group’s 1982 booklet likewise includes a section on “The Limitations of Community Memory,” which warned that technology alone cannot flatten social and political hierarchies. Again, Galloway echoed these concerns by copying key passages into his own notes (in bold):

3.15

Mobile Image, *Electronic Café*, computer screen showing database operations, 1984.
Courtesy Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive.

Community Memory is a demonstration of the potential of technology to be used for human liberation. However, **the existence of a potential does not assure or even make likely its utilization. Like solar energy, radio, etc., the realization of the possibilities must be accomplished in opposition to the current organization of power in the society. The structure of society will not be changed to the disadvantage of those currently holding power by the introduction of *any* new technology or application of technology . . . New technology for managing information and decision-making is a *requirement* for a humane world, but it can't replace the political process. Only humans can build a humane world.**³⁸

What was so innovative about *Electronic Café*—and what distinguished it from the universalist doctrine of the Olympics and its arts festival as well as Community Memory's own experiments—was that it explicitly infused its futuristic demonstration of new tools of decentralization, dematerialization, and deterritorialization with the politics of identity, access, and control, place, and space. The locations linked by the network underscored the specific ethnic, racial, and class content mapped onto the highly territorial geography of the largely segregated city. As will be discussed, the selected neighborhoods were not only physically and culturally separate but also subject to much larger citywide, national, and global economic forces that at times stoked tensions between them—tensions that were aired and debated on the network. Galloway acknowledged such tensions, noting, for example, that the Black and Korean-American communities were “at each other's throats” over perceptions of economic exploitation.³⁹ This type of site specificity tied the technological apparatus to the complex histories of the places involved and to their relationships to each other, to power, and to a range of competing past, present, and future imaginaries.

Similar to *Hole in Space*, initial interactions within the network tended to be characterized by preexisting notions of cultural difference and expectations of how one would be perceived at the other locations. As Rabinowitz recalled: “The first broadcasts were the communities identifying themselves. Each café found it important to define their cultural identity through some kind of presentation or performance. They began to transmit images and icons and ideas that demonstrated the breadth and scope of their culture. They were very conscious of saying ‘This is who we are.’”⁴⁰

3.16

ELECTRONIC CAFÉ

given categories of similarity and difference as well as their relation to a shared apparatus of experience. In one instance, white feminist poets at Günter's in Venice Beach set up a virtual poetry slam, intended as an "overture" to Black male poets at the Gumbo House in South LA.⁴¹ But the exchange remained one-sided, frustrating the Venice contingent's expectations of amicable reciprocity: when the men read, the women responded, but the latter's contributions elicited no reply. The feminist poets then confronted their counterparts, asking them to reflect on their behavior and the gender roles reinscribed by it. When the men tried to rationalize their response (or lack thereof), it set off a heated discussion. These participants engaged the telecommunication technology as a tool of struggle between contradictory points of view that would be resolved not because of the magic of the machines at hand but rather because people could use them to negotiate conflict actively, recognize mutually restrictive categories of experience (in this case, overdetermined identity categories), and eventually find common ground and shared potentialities. In the end, the two groups met in person for a joint reading at Café Cultural, a poetry venue in East LA. As Galloway put it, "There was this whole idea about lack of encounter. LA is a bunch of cities looking for a place . . . It's about encounter; [*Electronic Café*] could support communities—that was the thing—communities not defined by geography."⁴²

This focus on community and communication had particular resonance in the regional art milieu of the time. By the mid-1970s, there was a growing sense that Southern California had developed over the previous couple of decades into an important art center deserving of recognition and more substantial institutional support. In 1974, Peter Plagens published the landmark *Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945–1970*, which included a substantial overview of the Los Angeles area. That same year, the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA) opened, "designed," as director Bob Smith explained, "to meet the needs of the dynamic, growing, productive atmosphere now identified with Southern California art."⁴³ Alongside such attempts to bolster the region's self-identity and reputation, however, there was a palpable sense that its art community was still very much a work in progress, with serious questions about its stability and viability. LA's was a peripatetic scene, in which, as Jane McFadden recently put it, "communities would form,

for an evening or a decade, in a room, in a magazine, or on the radio, and then dissolve.”⁴⁴ Uncertainty pervades the early issues of the *LAICA Journal*, which was launched in advance of the Institute’s opening and became an important forum for the expression and exchange of ideas during this time. Artists, critics, and curators repeatedly mention Southern California’s relatively weak art community, the diffusing effects of the city’s sprawl, and its tenuous connections to the rest of the art world, with an almost obsessive focus on LA’s perceived provincialism and how the city stacked up against, and could ever hope to compete with, New York. In 1976, Richard Armstrong, then-curator of the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, noted a “general instability” of the art community, attributed to “an essential difference between the east and the west coasts as I know them—between Manhattan and Southern California: cultural surplus. New York has it. Southern California hasn’t.”⁴⁵ For Armstrong, this meant a dearth of contemporary art spaces and publications, which threatened the long-term prospects of a cohesive (and marketable) scene. Overall, there emerged an acute self-consciousness of place and a distinct ambivalence toward it, manifest in recurrent discussions about whether working in and around Los Angeles was an obstacle or whether the qualities of being there—a certain sense of openness and experimentalism, a better climate and more easygoing lifestyle, the lack of centralization, the fact that it was *not* New York—were really the scene’s most vital assets.⁴⁶

Most prominent was the discourse around community and the challenges of sustaining it. LAICA and other grassroots institutions such as the artist-founded Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE; 1978) were motivated not to expose people to international trends in contemporary art but rather “to supplement large deficiencies” in the local art community, to be “regional” in both content and purpose. As Smith put it on the eve of LAICA’s inauguration, more important than its exhibitions and journal was its mission to bring people together, to become “an essential and unifying catalyst . . . [that] fosters a new atmosphere of communication and cooperation.”⁴⁷ This was understood as a response to a problem that had plagued the Southern California art community for some time. In a 1978 article titled “Patterns in the Support Structure for California Art,” LA-based critic Peter Frank summed it up this way:

LA (need I remind you?) is a big, sprawling, spread-out region where people tend to congregate only in freeway pileups. Communication tends either to the hap-hazard or to the ritualized, depending on a deliberate attempt to seek out someone. Except for openings, there is no place one can go and dependably find birds of a feather; there are no real “artists’ bars.” With the whole situation depending on a high-powered meeting of money and minds that just was not coalescing, Los Angeles art crept into this decade like a mugging victim: battered, impoverished, scared, and disgusted. The final blow was dealt by the recession that crested around 1973, knocking the remaining wind out of the gallery commerce by doing in several regional industries (notably the aerospace industry).⁴⁸

The pockets of art communities that did exist at this time were largely separated by geographic location, which, due to the segregated makeup of the city, also meant division along racial, ethnic, and class lines. And although a hotbed for feminist art and activism during this time, the scene felt no less divided along traditional gender lines. In a 1976 interview between curator Marcia Tucker and LA-based artist Pat Steir, they agree that, in contrast to New York, “in Southern California, the male and female communities are completely split.”⁴⁹ The few more established art institutions struggled to bridge these divides, faced as they were with economic precarity and increasing criticisms about their conservatism and lack of diversity.⁵⁰ The question of how to bring people together across the vast urban sprawl seemed almost existential.

Although part of a national trend, the rise of arts-based collectives and “alternative spaces” in the 1970s therefore took on particular significance and urgency in the Southland. What began in the late 1960s and early 1970s with artist-run spaces such as Continuum (1967), Gallery 32 (1968), and F Space Gallery (1971) gained steam during the ensuing years as groups across the city sought to build community, primarily around identity-based categories. These endeavors were almost always oppositional; as Daniel Widener points out, in Los Angeles, “the creation of alternative cultural institutions and the cultural critique of collectively organized artists offered a popular challenge to the prevailing status quo.”⁵¹ Important feminist collectives, including the Feminist Art Workers, Ariadne, Mother Art, Sisters of Survival, Double X, and the Waitresses, emerged, as did the Latinx organizations such as Self-Help Graphics & Art and the Social and

Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) and Black collectives and art spaces such as Studio Z and the Brockman Gallery—the latter founded in 1967 and becoming, by the early 1970s, the center of the Black art community in Los Angeles.⁵² As Linda Frye Burnham explains, by the mid-1970s, “artist run spaces were cropping up all over Southern California,” mainly exhibiting in public spaces, on the streets and in local establishments, from coffee shops to laundromats.⁵³

One of the defining features of the 1970s Los Angeles art scene was its redefinition of what constitutes an art space—arguably also a response to a decentralized scene spread out over the vastness of the city. In her essay for the 2011–2012 exhibition “Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945–1980,” McFadden notes that LA artists at this time often exchanged the gallery and studio for what she calls “sitelessness,” meaning that “works occur[ed] in a variety of places, both physical and virtual, that were outside the traditional venues of art.”⁵⁴ The accuracy of that term may be debatable, since so much of that activity was decidedly site specific, explicitly incorporating its place and context, but Los Angeles was indeed increasingly characterized by “a new kind of venue for art . . . consist[ing] of a tenuous organizational network of actions and installations.”⁵⁵ Frank noted this in 1978, explaining that “there’s one form of alternative space that is peculiarly LA: the alternative-space-without-walls, an alternative host structure with no fixed space.”⁵⁶ Several organizations emerged to support this activity, including Carp (1975) and Some Serious Business (SSB; 1976), both of which held performances and exhibitions throughout the city, and artist-run publications and other distributive media such as records and audio cassettes of sound works were also understood as part of this movement. While the use of electronic and mass media was certainly not unique to the Los Angeles art scene, it was particularly conducive to a diffuse arts community lacking opportunities to gather physically—and in a city so dominated by movie and television industries. Southern California hence became, as Frank observed, “one of the densest areas for the dissemination of such material.”⁵⁷ McFadden likewise acknowledges the relative abundance of artists there who “experimented with, mined, and struggled with virtual sites of cultural experience, such as radio, television, video, and print journalism.”⁵⁸ Video was especially important, “serv[ing] as a crucial tool for exploring

pedagogy, collaboration, and communication in multiple forms. Video was a medium of community”—especially identity-based community.⁵⁹ In her 2014 essay on the queer West Hollywood video theater EZTV, Julia Bryan-Wilson similarly describes this period as “a specific moment for the potential of video production as a tool of community organizing in Southern California,” a “key to ‘social art’—an early forerunner to what people now call ‘social practice.’”⁶⁰

The proliferation of collectives, alternative spaces, and new media activities in the Los Angeles area was thus both highly generative and, at least in part, a sign of and response to the city’s long-standing challenges with community building. And whereas experimental solutions emerged, the difficulties of connecting diverse groups and activities were rarely overcome. To Widener, the especially deep racial divisions in the LA art scene were bound up with these difficulties, rooted not only in the country’s entrenched history of segregation but also in the unusual physical makeup of the region. In contrast to cities such as San Francisco, where certain postwar figures seemed capable of at least partially uniting different communities, “the infamous Southern California sprawl helped ensure the existence of parallel, and often unconnected, avant-gardes,” Widener explains. Unable to link the various art enclaves emerging across the city firmly, “Los Angeles facilitated the development of individuals such as Horace Tapscott, John Outterbridge, and Jayne Cortez, whose artistic production, political organizing, and teaching energy were aimed squarely at black Angelenos and took place largely, though never exclusively, beyond the attention, interest, or presence of politicized white experimentalists.”⁶¹ The drive to build artistic community in Southern California brought people together in support of common goals while further dividing up the art scene overall.

A similar situation emerged with the region’s art schools and university art departments, which served crucial roles at this time as some of the few physical and discursive “centers” in a distinctively decentralized city. “Of enormous importance,” Burnham explains, “were the contributors of colleges and universities, which showed and encouraged this young generation of artists, particularly University of California, San Diego (UCSD), the Claremont Colleges, Otis Art Institute, and the feminist art program at CalArts.”⁶² At the time, commentators saw these schools as comprising a vital system of support, at least partly necessitated by the early 1970s

economic recession but ultimately more suited to the region's needs. As Frank pointed out in 1978:

For an environment so seemingly hostile to the emergence and growth of new forms southern California has done remarkably well by its artists in the last several years. The main factor in this resurgence of activity has not been private galleries, nor museums, nor the initiative of critics or collectors. It has been the presence of a widespread college and university system that has, in Allan Kaprow's words, acted as the "principal patron" for the southern California scene. The schools, both private and public, have proved remarkably receptive to the creation of whole new formats, new divisions in their curricula, devoted to essentially experimental art research. This, and the general responsiveness to the idea of artists on campus from which it springs, has provided life- and art-sustaining employment for many of the Southland's artists . . . The schools have rushed in where the galleries and museums have feared to tread.⁶³

And yet, for the most part, the schools cultivated their own independent communities and identities. Southern California remained "regional" in the sense that, as Doris Cypis explains, "artists and art students tended to move in tribal packs, depending on the school they taught or studied at. Rarely did the tribes connect or exchange, except at art exhibitions at the few and far between venues." The coexistence of disparate art-school groups further fragmented an art scene riddled by the identity-based divisions described by Widener and others:

Aesthetic and cultural differences were also evident between arts organizations, as each worked almost exclusively within their own racial and gender contexts. Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) focused on Chicano sociopolitical issues; Self-Help Graphics & Art worked primarily with Latino and Chicano artists; the Woman's Building included only feminist women artists. Watts Community Arts Center was mostly African-American; there was an Asian-American film collective and Korean art groups, but there was barely any interaction between them. Meanwhile LAICA, Los Angeles Contemporary Art Exhibitions (LACE) (although initiated by diverse artists, including Chicano artists), Beyond Baroque, and Foundation for Art Resources (FAR) were essentially white. Gender, sexuality, and race were often segregated reflecting the dominant cultural context of the time.⁶⁴

Electronic Café can be understood as both indicative of this broader Southern California art context of connection and separation, community and fragmentation, site-specificity and “sitelessness,” and as exceptional in its attempt to explicitly engage, and potentially bridge, those very divisions. Participants posted stories, proverbs, and their perspectives on topics ranging from the plight of South American refugees and culturally entrenched sexism and racism, poverty, and lack of education to school-children wanting to find pen pals in other communities across Los Angeles. These posts often built on one another, transgressing boundaries, forging connections, and articulating common causes. Encountering a system of communication that was emphatically transparent, not necessarily in terms of its physical configuration but with respect to its ideological formation—its organizing categories, its parameters of knowledge and identity, and the kinds of relations it ultimately produced—users recognized and commented on its political potential. Some spoke of it as a more productive alternative to the frustrating state of mainstream television and radio. As one Community Memory post—titled “The Gilligan’s Island Syndrome”—explained, “The main limitation to communications technology is and always will be the content of the programming. Gilligan’s Island transmitted by direct-broadcast-satellite is still trash.”⁶⁵ Indeed, it was clear to many that the forms of spectatorship that were rapidly emerging at this time—video playback, satellite, cable systems—may have offered more variety, but access to devices alone did not yield social progress. Another post summed up the situation: “I think the ELECTRONIC CAFE is a wonderful opportunity for the community(s) to define what we want of a communication system . . . It is clear that the corporations already have this technology at their disposal . . . It is now time for all of us to determine our own future by thinking PRACTICALLY about what kinds of uses and creations we can use it for. I like the idea that this is in cafes all over the city because at the very least that is what we all have in common.”⁶⁶

Pronouncements such as these exemplify the way *Electronic Café* both facilitated a critique of techno-utopian visions and modeled a productive fantasy that eschewed fanciful hopes for harmonious resolution in favor of a concrete, open-ended process of reflexive interaction and exchange. The project was less successful when it reproduced conventional attitudes

of emancipation—attitudes at least partially enabled by the artists' hands-off approach—as a technical rather than political question. For some, the setup implied that social transformation would result from access alone, from “more complete participation in ‘community’ than otherwise might be possible” as one user enthused. Another post proclaimed that new technologies would become “transformational media” when put into the hands of people broadcasting “messages and examples of LOVE, PEACE AND POSITIVE POSSIBILITIES FOR A HARMONIOUS WORLD.”⁶⁷ In contrast, the transformative potential of *Electronic Café* emerged at those moments when it conveyed—and turned into a mobilizing impulse—the discrepancy between communication media's means of production (material and intellectual) and the relations of users both to those means and to one another. Only then could participants recognize the limitations of technological protocols and begin to imagine and forge provisional connections that defied predetermined categories. The network became the technology of a popular struggle that demanded the negotiation of the ideal and the real, the ideological and the material, the dominant and the alternative, not as opposites but rather as components of a relational field that was itself a subject of contention. Rather than propose new monolithic cultures of authenticity, *Electronic Café* modeled the construction of overlapping, polymorphous publics, all of which deviated from entrenched conventions of identity and experience.⁶⁸ Future imaginings were linked to an awareness of current conditions and their contexts. Participants could thus envision a future based on shared material circumstances and concerns and contrast such visions with pervasive myths of techno-social progress. Fantasy became the generator of truly innovative communication with the potential for real social transformation.

TECHNO-ECONOMIES OF A WORLD CITY

These fantastic moments of critical (and self-critical) communication were especially meaningful within the work's specific urban context. Along with the more general dynamics described by Manuel Castells, M. Christine Boyer, Benjamin Bratton, and other urbanists discussed in the previous chapter, a distinct and increasingly dominant set of political

and economic powers were converging upon Los Angeles at this time. The uneven development detailed in Mike Davis's formative study, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (1990), was a result of this convergence. LA in the 1980s was in the throes of what Roger Keil calls "internationalization," a concerted attempt to transform its identity from regional to global center. Envisioning the city as a prime link to an emergent Pacific Rim economy, Mayor Tom Bradley (1973–1993) championed "Project World City" as the centerpiece of his administration.⁶⁹ This involved an alignment of neoliberal policy, development initiatives, and global flows of capital, causing massive reorganizations of space and redistributions of resources, along with a refashioning of the city's image as a multicultural melting pot. The locals and locales connected by *Electronic Café* were already entangled in a worldwide economic, political, and technological network; the struggles with and within this network permeated the very relations that comprised the work's "telecollaborative" apparatus. Situating its explicitly regional and identity-based experiences within an expansive media ecosystem—broadcast news, Olympic spectacle, the presidential election, the high-tech communication devices themselves—*Electronic Café* underscored these entanglements. The work exemplified the fact that the urban milieu was a function of much larger national and international forces.

Globalization plays itself out in the urban political sphere, which is where world cities actually take shape. "Global" and "local," Keil explains, "should not be viewed in metaphors of confrontations between static poles but rather as a process of mutual definition as a result of material relations of power. Not only do traditional communities take up the fight against intrusive global capital, but these communities are restructured in the process, *concurrently changing their political and social realities*."⁷⁰ Writing in 1998, Keil notes that this "process of mutual definition" had been foundational in Los Angeles for two decades, with the late 1970s and early 1980s as the key moment in which a fantasy of LA as quintessentially internationalized took hold. This required an expansion of the essential myth of the city as a pure, white haven of sunshine and health, fame and fortune, a myth that had already long obscured the violent histories of people of color and the working classes, of the urban masses who actually built Los Angeles and who would now shoulder the onerous social and economic realities of world-city formation. As Daniel Widener notes,

while economic expansion of the Los Angeles area in the 1970s was often heralded as a success story of American capitalism, “from the point of view of working people, ‘success’ meant outmigration and suburban marginality or defense employment for whites, economic dislocation and social upheaval for blacks, and the proliferation of low-wage, non-union jobs for a mostly Latino and Asian immigrant workforce.”⁷¹ Nonetheless, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, a new, similarly whitewashed view of globalization had emerged: what was formerly seen as a mixed blessing, as an engine of growth that also came with challenges of increased immigration and other urban “problems,” was eclipsed by solely positive image of organized, beneficial change, of LA as a “fertile matrix of future development,” programmatically devoid of people of color and “deproletarianized.”⁷²

The push for internationalization pushed cultural politics—particularly identity and community based—to the fore, both among LA’s neighborhoods and between the local and the global. “Without a constant negotiation of boundaries,” Keil writes, “the diverse world city communities that live in close proximity one another would not be sustainable even for a short time.” In addition, the cultural politics of this emergent world city tended to divide the urban polity into two camps: the globalists, promoting bourgeoisie spectacle and “world class culture,” and community culture as a different kind of world culture, based on immigrant and other kinds of ethnic or racial minority experiences. The result was a “constant need to strike new territorial compromises between the local and the global, between spaces used as modules of the global economy and places used predominantly for the reproduction of local community.”⁷³

This is precisely what was taking place in the types of neighborhoods linked together by *Electronic Café*, particularly among the largely working-class minority communities surrounding the Downtown business district, the newly planned economic and symbolic hub of world-city development. Koreatown, for instance, epitomized global-local interconnectedness, as immigrant entrepreneurs there were completing an international economic cycle that started decades earlier when the United States exported capital, technology, and military power to South Korea. Only officially named in 1980 after a decade of rapid immigration, the neighborhood exemplified the notion that, as Keil puts it, “world city formation is the urbanization of global restructuring.”⁷⁴ This mostly

took the form of Korean small businesses serving low-income, non-white populations typically overlooked and underserved by larger corporations.⁷⁵ Filling this niche came, however, with a range of complex local challenges. Sandwiched between the emergent Downtown and what was often cast as an irredeemable “ghetto” of South LA, Koreatown’s relative economic stability, improved public education, and decreased crime seemed to confirm the long-standing myth of Asians as a “model minority.” In reality, though, residents typically worked longer hours for less pay than others, while receiving inadequate social and health-care services. The community also faced anti-Asian resentment on multiple fronts: non-Korean residents, who still made up more than 90 percent of the newly branded neighborhood; the adjacent Black and Latinx neighborhoods, where many Korean-owned businesses were located; and the city at large, where rising Asian immigrant populations and economic success were often viewed as threats.⁷⁶ As sociologists Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich documented in their 1988 study of Koreatown, this led to government interventions that inhibited Korean business growth, including policy changes and the discriminatory enforcement of preexisting regulations. (Such uneven enforcement notoriously did not extend to the Black neighborhood, despite regular resident complaints, which only heightened the resentment between the groups.) In response, the community turned inward, intensifying and consolidating their own relations and forming a largely closed off micro-economy built on what Light and Bonacich call “ethnic entrepreneurship,” which “foster[ed] cross-class ethnic solidarities instead of cross-ethnic class solidarities.” Koreatown’s urbanization of the global at once enhanced the diversity of Los Angeles and further divided its working class along ethnic lines, “leaving unchecked the worst consequences of capitalist social relations.”⁷⁷

LA’s Mexican population had long struggled with the city’s continuous growth and restructuring. As Raúl H. Villa explains, since its nineteenth-century pueblo origins, “the city’s working-class *mexicano* population has had an ironic place within this historical metamorphosis, being simultaneously in the geographic center *and* the economic margins of the city. Stated differently, their productive labors have always been essential to the city’s growth while at the same time their places of reproduction have been in the way of its ceaseless redevelopment.”⁷⁸ This resulted in

repeated cycles of displacement and “barrioization,” the forced physical and social segregation by the repressive forces of dominant culture—allyships of government initiatives, the police judicial system, urban planners, the mainstream media, and private capital.⁷⁹ In response, LA’s Chicano community of the first half of the twentieth century established a robust “alternative public sphere,” comprising community-based magazines and newspapers, customary gatherings in local establishments to discuss pressing issues, an active street culture, and the increased availability of popular commercial media such as recorded music, fostering a sense of cultural unity and opportunities for resistance and activism.⁸⁰ As mentioned in chapter 2, the “expressway generation” that came of age in the 1970s and 1980s had been subject to much more aggressive and larger-scale social and physical displacements, as monumental highway construction and urban “renewal” projects of the previous decades violently disrupted the barrio communities of East LA. “These signal developments of the 1950s and 1960s,” Villa explains, “materially facilitated Los Angeles’s next transformation—into the nation’s super-city—and symbolically represented this image to the outside world.”⁸¹ In the early 1980s, residents of East LA were acutely aware of this history of displacement and the community’s powerlessness in defining their own future. In his 1983 history of the neighborhood, Ricardo Romo captures this sense of disempowerment:

On the east side, where there is a serious housing shortage and many of the existing houses are of substandard construction, where the schools are overcrowded and the children often poorly educated, where traffic congestion has become a way of life, where smog alerts are still too common, and where residents have but little command over their economic and political destiny, the problems of urban growth are ever present in residents’ minds. Lacking ethnic political representation in city and county elected offices, eastsiders have had difficulty in presenting their views on the type of community that their children will inherit.⁸²

In fact, the private developers of the adjacent Downtown district dominated state, city, and county politics, thus controlling the future of East LA, from infrastructure to housing to its labor pool.⁸³ In his 1984 history, Rodolfo Acuña similarly notes that residents were facing the harsh reality

that the scourge of “urban renewal” projects would inevitably continue. Acuña ties that reality to both the local, commercially focused “ruling elite” and looming macroeconomic developments that seemed likely to exacerbate the community’s plight:

The Eastside problems of unemployment, gangs, and inferior schooling are phenomena created by the system, not by Mexican Americans. These problems form a very real part of the capitalist system . . . Future changes in production will, in great part, determine the fate of East Los Angeles, generating further alterations in the utility and value of property. The current conversion from an industrially based economy to high-tech production could have disastrous consequences . . . In all events, the future of East Los Angeles is now at a crossroads. The prospects of Mexicans continuing to occupy this community as it is presently constituted look dismal.⁸⁴

The neighborhood’s historical “alternative public sphere” would continue to provide essential resources to residents while serving as a nexus of communal “battle against the bulldozers” resistance. Yet, it was simply no match for urban ruling powers fixated on world-city formation.

The contradictions of such formation were arguably most extreme in the African American community of South LA. Long disadvantaged, this community now confronted the irony of a Black mayor championing a vision of Los Angeles as a global center of cultural diversity and interconnectedness while presiding over policies that further impoverished and marginalized local communities of color. The late 1970s witnessed a historic “tax revolt,” culminating in the 1978 watershed passage of Proposition 13, a voter initiative that greatly reduced property taxes, causing a precipitous decline in municipal revenue. From the start, this revolt was waged along racial lines, promoted as a way to keep “inner-city” populations from invading suburbia. As Davis recounts: “In rousing their neighbors, tax protestors frequently resorted to the inflammatory image of the family homestead taxed to extinction in order to finance the integration of public education and other social programs obnoxious to white suburbanites.” Promoters of Prop 13 also allied their cause with resistance to school integration and busing. The result was “one of the largest mass windfalls of wealth in history” that devastated social services and public

schools in South LA, East LA, and other communities of color, while reinforcing their segregation.⁸⁵

The march toward world-city status thus coincided with the entrenchment of the image of Black and Latinx neighborhoods as barbaric, gang-infested, poverty-stricken ghettos. Whereas violent crime did surge in these areas at the time, as Davis explains, it was often exaggerated by the media, feeding “a voyeuristic titillation to white suburbanites devouring lurid imagery in their newspapers or on television.”⁸⁶ This situation led to increasingly brutal and militarized police crackdowns in South LA, the virtual exclusion of Black people from the broader public realm, including the city’s vast stretches of playgrounds, beaches, and entertainment centers, and justifications for urban redevelopment plans that drained resources from the community and further ghettoized its residents.⁸⁷ “Characterized by limited transparency, open soliciting of international capital, and the participation of self-appointed groups of powerful citizens,” Widener explains, “the cultural dimensions of efforts to build a ‘world city’ served as a de facto transfer of resources away from South Los Angeles.”⁸⁸ As Davis points out, however, one very particular global industry—the drug trade—remained available to the community, yet another effect of international shifts in production and capital. “Through ‘crack,’” he explains, “[drug gangs] have discovered a vocation for the ghetto in LA’s new ‘world city’ economy.”⁸⁹

Mayor Bradley’s seeming indifference to the plight of the South LA community, even as he touted the benefits of a multiethnic, tolerant city, reflected a distinct shift in minority-based cultural politics in Los Angeles at this time, one that fit within the broader vision of world-city development. Defined by what Widener calls “the twin imperatives of inclusion and containment,” such politics effectively split along class lines in two contradictory directions: on the one hand, a middle-class focus on the urban public sphere as a site of celebratory diversity and community cohesion, championed by a rapidly rising cohort of Black politicians eager to move away from the radicalism of the previous era; on the other, the working-class reality of economic dislocation, political marginalization, and social conflict, in response to which mere survival became the primary concern.⁹⁰ Public affirmations of multiculturalism and accompanying municipal policies masked the unrelenting impoverishment of LA’s

minority communities and the often ruthless efforts to contain them while helping to uphold an image of urban peace necessary for the rise of the global city.⁹¹ As Widener explains, “Inclusion and exclusion formed part of a dialectical exercise of power that functioned as an intermittent reinforcement capable of deflecting popular concerns while allowing unabated upward transfer of cultural and financial capital.”⁹²

This dialectic of inclusion and exclusion operated within a larger system of “trickle up” development aligned with global capital flows and sustained by public displays of both local cultural diversity and world-class cultural sophistication. “Ethnic” street fairs and other varieties of what Widener calls a “sealed variety of multiculturalism” proliferated at this time, reinforcing a reductive notion of identity-based authenticity, despite histories of multiracial and multiethnic communities in Los Angeles and the intersectional evolution of the city’s culture.⁹³ Large-scale projects were, in turn, designed to “deregalize” LA, as cosmopolitan culture was elevated over community culture.⁹⁴ Grand spectacles, most notably the 1984 Olympics, were to signal the triumphant entry of LA onto the world stage. The arts, though, would arguably serve an even more enduring role in mediating the determined economic processes of internationalization. While local arts organizations, community workshops, and venues such as the Watts Towers Arts Center, the Inner City Cultural Center, and the Bilingual Foundation for the Arts were being drained of public resources, huge investments in large outdoor sculptures, new museums and performance centers, and other public arts programs—the decidedly internationalist Olympic Arts Festival being just one temporary example—protected municipal authorities from popular complaints about inner-city cultural depression, while facilitating corporate redevelopment and providing the symbolic capital fitting to a global city.⁹⁵

This “conjuncture of arts bonanza and scorched earth,” as Davis puts it, was nowhere more apparent in the redevelopment of the once-distinct Bunker Hill neighborhood into a gleaming Downtown business district, the symbolic centerpiece of which would be a new cutting-edge art museum. Conceived by Mayor Bradley and several arts patrons in 1979, the museum was imagined as the nucleus of large cultural complex akin to New York’s Lincoln Center.⁹⁶ Initially called the Los Angeles Museum of Modern Art, the planners quickly renamed it the Museum of

Contemporary Art (MOCA) to signal an international rather than regional focus.⁹⁷ The new museum would be designed by Japanese architect Arata Isozaki, and its opening was intended to coincide with the 1984 Olympics. (It did not actually open until 1986.) In 1983, the city opened the Frank Gehry–designed “Temporary Contemporary” as an interim exhibition space—which served, a year later, as the *Electronic Café* node. Almost immediately, the museum loaded itself up with works by blue-chip artists, most notably by purchasing works by Mark Rothko, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Franz Kline, Claes Oldenburg, and James Rosenquist through a “sweetheart” deal with one of its board members, Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, a count from Milan, Italy.⁹⁸

MOCA was understood as essential to the district’s development, which relied on an orchestrated, multilayered process of “pushing” out undesirables while “pulling” in desirables. The former involved what Widener calls “new technologies of exclusion,” including militaristic police tactics and the destruction and reconstruction of public space, that would effectively drive non-white populations to the margins. World-class institutions such as MOCA could then anchor the “pull,” signaling a reclamation of the area “as a public space for affluent Angelinos generally uninterested in traveling downtown after dark.”⁹⁹ As Jo-Anne Berelowitz explained in a 1990 study: “Clearly intended as more than merely a showcase for art, more than merely the signifier of its own function, MOCA serves also as climate creator for international finance; as catalyst for developing a ‘real’ downtown; as gathering place; a generator of intriguing experimentalism; a social adventure; a demarcator of innovation; engenderer of honor, attention, business and jobs; monument; destination; and LA’s first step toward urbanism.”¹⁰⁰ Widener likewise sees the museum as an example of how the arts can be instrumentalized on behalf of “trickle up” development: “The story of MOCA, downtown redevelopment, and the rapid rise of a real-estate-driven ‘high-culture’ boom in Los Angeles of the 1980s offers a salient window into the place of expressive culture in the exercise of local power. Constituting a kind of cultural revolution from above, the arts-centered downtown redevelopment served as an impetus for the transfer of vast sums, the enactment of new patterns of spatial separation under the aegis of intensely aggressive policing, and a shift in cultural resources from underdeveloped areas of the city to its increasingly parasitic center.”¹⁰¹

MOCA was thus the cornerstone of an extensive public–private partnership that, starting in the 1970s and 1980s, would radically transform the Bunker Hill neighborhood, literally and figuratively flattening it to make way for the rapid rise of skyscrapers, government and other cultural institutions, and upscale residences. The last bastions of affordable housing were condemned as “slums” and destroyed, residents were displaced, the hill was smoothed out, and space itself was privatized—in terms of both ownership and experience. As Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Gail Sansbury describe in their history of the area, “The redevelopment projects created isolated corporate ‘monuments’ that turned their backs to public streets, replacing the streets with private internal paseos and plazas.”¹⁰² Writing in 1995, they observe: “The present streets of Bunker Hill lack the qualities of complexity, diversity, and contextualism that characterized the earlier landscape. The mega-blocks that are now dominating Bunker Hill have been developed as disjointed and fragmented pieces. The episodic nature of such developments prevents them from effectively connecting with the city’s urban tissue. The ‘inside’ private spaces system systematically exclude the ‘outside’ public environment. High-rise towers turn their backs to the city; corporate plazas are separated from sidewalks by high protective walls; skyways take pedestrians away from the streets; escalators lead to sunken shopping malls and parking structures.”¹⁰³ The result was a generic American downtown, devoid of any distinctive qualities of the original neighborhood, stripped of its history, and cleansed of its long-standing working-class minority community. “This,” Loukaitou-Sideris and Sansbury explain, “combined with the absence of ‘urban clues’—older buildings and urban artifacts that relay the history of the site—prevents the visitor to Bunker Hill from being oriented in space and time, and from developing a complete understanding of the area’s social and historical context.”¹⁰⁴

The central hub of *Electronic Café*—MOCA’s Temporary Contemporary, along with its surrounding Downtown district—was thus the physical and symbolic locus of a citywide network of power and capital that was, at that very moment, seeking to establish itself within a worldwide economic network, which, in turn, was impacting each of the supposedly distinct neighborhoods linked together by the project. Amid the spectacles of the Olympics and its international Arts Festival, participants

were called upon to reinject their own site-specific stories and histories into these intertwined networks. The new, globally focused art museum was recast as a repository for these local histories, moments of exchange, and markers of community, place, culture, and identity; it was where the Community Memory database was housed and where things were sent from the other neighborhoods to be printed, displayed on walls, viewed, recorded, stored, and ostensibly preserved. MOCA and its emergent Downtown, the epicenter of world-city formation, were transformed into a site and archive for that which was being actively displaced, marginalized, and erased.

CRITICAL UTOPIA

Along with the humanist ideal of global unity on which every occurrence of the Olympics is built, LA's games relied on a blend of innovation and corporatization that informed everything from the modernistic design of logos, typefaces, and uniforms to the opening ceremonies themselves, capped off by a man flying into the stadium on a Bell Aerosystems jet pack to light the Olympic flame (figure 3.17). Facilitating the two-week extravaganza was a widely publicized telecommunication infrastructure constructed with approximately \$50 million in equipment provided by IBM, AT&T, MCI, and Motorola.¹⁰⁵ (IBM was an official sponsor of these Olympics, the first to be paid for entirely by sales of television rights, tickets, and corporate sponsorships rather than public funds.) Comprising an array of high-tech devices—email, voicemail, searchable databases, credential scanners, online bulletin boards—this “revolutionary” telecommunication system was built to support every aspect of the Olympic operations, from managing time and bodies more efficiently (scheduling, food preparation, transportation) to bolstering security procedures, streamlining internal communications, and enabling the mass dissemination of official information.¹⁰⁶ As an InfoWorld article put it at the time, “The 1984 Summer Olympic Games will have all the technological pomp and polish of a NASA Space Shuttle launch . . . This year's games will be saturated with every piece of computerized equipment imaginable.”¹⁰⁷ Along with its celebrated Arts Festival, this spectacular display



of advanced technology represented a depoliticized dream in which art, sport, and technology work in unison on behalf of humanist ideals, whose future fulfillment was set in some unspecified time and place.

Such future imaginings belonged to the techno-euphoric moment—the “computerphilia” identified by Community Memory a couple of years prior. As mentioned, by the mid-1980s, new telecommunication technologies had become thoroughly mythologized, with the personal computer promoted as the path toward the fulfillment of a utopian vision. Instead of a room-sized machine, the computer became a domesticated tool, deemed capable of freeing individual users from the centralized control of information, labor, and communication.¹⁰⁸ The same year as the Los Angeles

3.17

Bill Suitor flying in on a Bell Aerosystems jet pack to light the Olympic flame, Los Angeles, 1984.

Olympics, Apple unveiled its famous “1984” television commercial, introducing the Macintosh personal computer as a means of liberating users from the forces of conformity and Big Brother—a utopian reimagining of George Orwell’s dystopic sci-fi vision.¹⁰⁹ Considered a watershed moment in the history of the personal computer, the commercial contained blatant Cold War overtones, presenting consumer choice as a Manichaeian battle between good technology (independent, individualized, democratic) and bad technology (centralized, authoritarian, collectivist, soul crushing).¹¹⁰ The Macintosh was marketed as the epitome of the former, in contrast to corporate behemoths, namely IBM. Yet, Apple’s strategy fit within already prevalent industry bids to humanize the computer. As Ted Friedman recounts in *Electric Dreams: Computers in American Culture*, early 1980s PC ads were focused on “popularizing . . . a new vision of computing as decentralized, democratic, and empowering” as a way to expand the market beyond spreadsheet users and to counter apprehensive views of technology propagated by movies such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*.¹¹¹ “Companies bent over backwards,” Friedman explains, “to reassure consumers that computers were simple, unthreatening devices.”¹¹² A few years before Apple’s Mac ad, IBM launched a campaign featuring the protagonist from Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, but with a decidedly different message. These ads transformed Chaplin’s tramp from a nobody caught in a world of hostile technology into a mobile, autonomous, happy worker, liberated by personal computing.¹¹³

The emancipatory vision of telecommunications was widely embraced as a way for everyone to participate in the making of the future—as an age-old science-fiction dream finally come true.¹¹⁴ As Turner argues, by the end of the 1980s, “the same machines that had served as the defining devices of cold war technocracy emerged as the symbols of transformation,” reconceived as a path to the “counterculture dream of empowered individualism, collaborative community, and spiritual communion.”¹¹⁵ The result was a fanciful “new economy” built on a mix of libertarian politics, techno-utopianism, and counterculture aesthetics.¹¹⁶ As the history of the “Whole Earth” network makes clear, hippie-era ideals were co-opted by the emerging technological hub of Silicon Valley and the forces of capitalism. Countercultural entrepreneurs such as Stewart Brand championed the conventionally utopian techno-liberationist myths of the day.

Around this time, a number of artists embraced the idea of telecommunication networks as potentially emancipatory tools, a means of resisting media consolidations and institutional constraints. Novel devices were presented as autonomous and available (or soon to be) for free use, anticipating a time when they would be widely accessible and unhindered by the forces of domination. New technology would mobilize and empower artists to operate outside art institutions, wrest control over their tools, transcend physical and geographic limitations, and unify their communities via new means of authentic individual and collective expression. As Marc Ries explains, these projects “expressed a (perhaps diffuse) political will to create the conditions for a social space embracing the *equality*, *participation*, and *accessibility* of and for potentially everyone via technology that genuinely incorporated [a] communitarian ideal.”¹¹⁷ Implicit here was the notion that social and political reorganization—based on collectivism, collaboration, universal access to free-flowing information, and the decentralization and deterritorialization of power structures—could be achieved through a global village of networked individuals freely expressing themselves. Works of art would function as models for this imagined future. Although looking ahead to a world of instant, all-inclusive communication, this vision was largely based on nostalgic ideas of public life and the democratizing function of free exchange, a technologized version of what Jürgen Habermas famously called the “bourgeois public sphere.”

British artist Roy Ascott produced a series of works he called “telematic,” borrowing a term coined in the 1978 report “*L’informatisation de la société*” by France’s Inspector General Simon Nora and Finance Inspector Alain Minc. Nora and Minc described an impending telematic revolution, in which increased interconnection via computers and telecommunications “will alter the entire nervous system of social organization . . . open[ing] radically new horizons.”¹¹⁸ With works such as *Terminal Art* (1980) and *La Plissure du Texte* (1983), Ascott sought “collective consciousness” via disembodiment, dematerialization, and deterritorialization, a liberation of art from the “barriers” of materiality and geography.¹¹⁹ In “Art and Telematics: Towards a Network Consciousness” (1984), he proclaimed that “computer-mediated networks” open possibilities for “planetary conviviality and creativity” because “networking puts you, in a sense, out



of body, linking your mind into a kind of timeless sea.”¹²⁰ For Ascott, the technology itself would be transformative.¹²¹

Other telecommunication projects from this time grappled with this kind of techno-utopianism. *The World in 24 Hours* (*Die Welt in 24 Stunden*) (1982) was organized by Austrian artist Robert Adrian X as part of that year’s Ars Electronica festival (figure 3.18). During a twenty-four-hour period, artists in fifteen locations around the world used an ARTEX-based network of telephones, fax machines, and slow-scan TV devices to transmit works of art—each at noon in their respective time zones—to a central receiving location in Linz, Austria. Adrian understood the project in terms similar to Ascott’s, describing it as “a kind of telematic world map”¹²² and explaining that it was “intended to develop techniques for

3.18

Robert Adrian X, *The World in 24 Hours* (*Die Welt in 24 Stunden*), 1982. Photograph by Sepp Schaffler.

individual, personal, use of existing telecommunications technology” and to “find human meaning in an electronic space.”¹²³ Yet, while enthusiastic about the potential of telecommunication technologies in the hands of individuals, Adrian acknowledged the project’s limitations: “Some things didn’t get recorded or photographed . . . the sound recording equipment broke down . . . the person with the camera went home to bed, with the camera! . . . we ran out of video tape in the middle of the night when everything was locked . . . one telephone died and another got very neurotic in the early morning . . . we all forgot and lost things, including telephone numbers.” He also recognized the disproportionate power relations embedded in the apparatus, “the fact that most of the globe is missing from the network (all of Africa and South America and most of Eastern Europe and Asia).”¹²⁴ Some participants expressed ambivalence about the dematerialization and disembodiment promised by telecommunication technology—and celebrated by the very project in which they were participating. In a series of messages transmitted over the network during the event, Eric Gidney (in Sydney, Australia) wondered if the project “IGNORES WHAT WE AS A SOCIAL ANIMAL CONSIDER FUNDAMENTAL NECESSITIES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION . . . I.E. PERSONAL CONTACT BODY LANGUAGE, PROXIMITY, GESTURES [*SIC*], PERSONAL IMPRESSIONS ETC. ETC.” (Adrian dismissed this query: “IF YOU WANT BODY CONTACT GO TO A MESSAGE PARLOUR.”) Gidney also raised questions about gender equality: “IS ‘ARS ELECTRONICA’ MALE DOMINATED??? THE RELATION OF THE NUMBER OF MEN AND WOMEN IS DOMINATED BY MEN . . . WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?????”¹²⁵

One work included in *The World in 24 Hours* seemed to engage the relationship between disembodied communication and dominant (patriarchal) power relations. *Signal Breakdown—Semaphore Piece*, by Peggy Smith, Nancy Paterson, and Derek Dowden, founders of the Toronto-based space Artculture Resource Center (ARC), paired slow-scan transmissions of Smith using flag semaphore to spell out the words “signal breakdown” with text messages containing emergency warnings of an attack on communication systems by a “feminist art army.” *Signal Breakdown* reinjected the body—both literally through the semaphore dance and figuratively through the references to feminist militancy—into a

project that generally embraced disembodiment as a path toward a utopian global village. The work suggested that the entangled politics of gender could not be avoided or smoothed over by the network; emphasis on the (female) body complicated Adrian's stated desire to model a unified and universal electronic space, accessibly by everyone and located everywhere and nowhere, for the expression of "human meaning." As Haraway explains, "Feminist embodiment . . . is not about fixed location in a reified body, female or otherwise, but about nodes in fields, inflections in orientations, and responsibility for difference in material-semiotic fields of meaning."¹²⁶ *Signal Breakdown* disrupted what Haraway calls the "god trick" of technologically enabled communication, the utopian myth of universal access, objectivity, and equality that "den[ies] the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective."¹²⁷

The precarity of the technological setup in *Electronic Café* was likewise an important part of the overall research project, as the clunkiness and periodic malfunctions of the devices contrasted with their fanciful promise and the sci-fi aesthetic of the consoles in which they were arranged. More generally, Mobile Image attempted to magnify the stakes mentioned by Haraway, producing a work that at once modeled a form of productive future imagining and encouraged critiques of techno-utopian myths. As such, *Electronic Café* also corresponded with a particular discursive shift in America. During the early to mid-1980s, writing on science fiction and the politics of utopia proliferated, in works including, notably, Fredric Jameson's "Progress versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future?" (1982), Donna Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism" (1985), and Tom Moylan's *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (1986), as well as in a special issue of the *Black American Literature Forum* focusing on the work of science-fiction writers Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler (1984).¹²⁸ Although diverse in their specific subject matter, these texts were united in their attempts to trace the historical development and contemporary pertinence of (and indeed, the urgent need for) future imagining—what Moylan called "images of desire, figures of hope." They all struggled to articulate a truly progressive, innovative engagement with the future that would transform rather than merely repackage the ideological and material limitations of the past and the present.¹²⁹

They also distinguished such an engagement from early modern conceptions of utopia, which both Jameson and Moylan link to the rise of capitalism and its ideological structure. According to Jameson, that structure perpetuated a notion of “progress” that validated enduring discrepancies between everyday experiences and the promises of tomorrow. As Moylan explains, early utopian fictions of the future “provided images of alternatives to the given situation which, while not yet existing in history, drew on the contradictions of the time and anticipated a response to the conflicting needs of the dominant and subordinate classes.”¹³⁰ Deeply embedded in the colonial and imperial ethos, these “alternatives” were first projected onto the uncharted geographical spaces of the New World and then later relocated to another time—to the future, when truly revolutionary change would ostensibly yield a perfected society.¹³¹ However, as part of a class struggle over the means of material and cultural creative production and exploitation, such utopian visions have the power to both symbolically appease and politically challenge: “Utopian dissatisfaction and imagery has been enlisted into the process of the creation of needs subordinated to the demands of production and profit; while, on the other hand, the very dream-making activity of the utopian imagination continually resists the limitation of human desire to the economic and bureaucratic demands of the given system.”¹³² As Robert Elliot Fox discussed with regard to Delany’s mid-1970s novels, this “dichotomy of experience” of both gratification and alienation accounts for the resurgence of utopian desires in a specifically American context. The political upheaval of the 1960s and its aftermath produced a creative activism, particularly among feminist and Black writers and artists, that sought to raise consciousness about and transcend the commercial-industrial machine of the utopian dreamscape as an engine for the sale of material and immaterial consumer goods, from advertisements for suburban lifestyles to Hollywood values and Disneyworld ideals.¹³³

Crucially, this surge in subversive utopianism was self-consciously critical, acknowledging the dialectical nature of utopia, its historical failures, as well as its transgressive potential. What Moylan terms “critical utopia” revives future imagining but refuses predetermined solutions and resolutions, dwelling instead on the conflicts between present and prospective conditions.¹³⁴ It “rejects utopia as blueprint while preserving it as

dream.”¹³⁵ For example, Delany’s narratives articulate what Jane B. Weedman calls the conflict between “the prevailing idealism of the American dream and Black American reality”; they manifest a “double consciousness” in W. E. B. Du Bois’s sense of the term, Weedman explains, “a psychological dichotomy which results when an individual lives in a culture, such as the black community, yet must be aware for his survival of the workings and expectations of a dominate [sic] culture.”¹³⁶ Rather than paint a beautiful picture of the future that only distracts from the often-violent constraints of the given, a critical utopian practice has as its subject the very construction of utopia, not as an inherently human need but rather as a systemic necessity. Looking to the future is thus understood as a highly contested anticipation of the not yet concrete that determines the relationality between past, present, and future experiences and perspectives, who and what gets to be part of the future imaginary, and whose histories will determine the outcome of what tomorrow looks like.

As a critical utopian project, *Electronic Café* was distinct from various works by other artists and from Mobile Image’s previous work. Whereas *Satellite Arts* and *Hole in Space* implicitly politicized telecommunication technology by encouraging participants to think dialectically about the relationships between materiality and dematerialization, territory and deterritorialization, emerging possibilities and imposed constraints, *Electronic Café* explicitly couched such relationships in those “material-semiotic fields of meaning” that Haraway sees as constituting categories of difference. In 1982, Galloway and Rabinowitz taught a performance course at Loyola Marymount University titled “Aesthetic Research in Telecommunications,” in which they attempted to reinsert the body emphatically into an ostensibly disembodied technology. Similar to *Satellite Arts*, the course was held in the composite-image screen, exposing students to the reality of “life in virtual space.” From multiple sites across campus, participants engaged in everyday tasks, collaborative problem solving, and theatrical skits mimicking real-life situations.¹³⁷ In one example, two students interacted “physically” from different locations, not only “touching” each other sexually but also melding together in erotic ways, achieving a level of intimacy, an “electronic foreplay.”¹³⁸ The course was Galloway and Rabinowitz’s attempt to develop a more embodied telecommunication experience. Yet, it was primarily focused on individual expression

and interpersonal contact, emphatically private, apparently apolitical, and grounded in the notion of the autonomous, whole (bourgeois) self.

Building on the lessons of this course and their earlier artworks—the lack of a wholly autonomous “third space” in *Satellite Arts* and the fact that communications were encumbered by delays, feedback, and breakdowns, the failure of many *Hole in Space* participants to think beyond a narrow set of behaviors and their own personal desires—*Electronic Café* underscored the specificity of bodies and places, identities and localized perspectives, in relation to the larger technological apparatus and dominant power structures. As Galloway and Rabinowitz explained in their preparatory notes for the project: “Electronic Cafe network is designed and presented as a ‘creative solutions network’—creative conversation among/between the divergent cultural communities that make up the greater Los Angeles community. It is designed as a forum for shared ideas/exchange of Art, cultural concerns, collaborative attempts at approaching and proposing solutions to common problems as well as expressing the unique social influences that are brought to the common culture of Los Angeles.”¹³⁹ Whereas the idea of a “creative solutions network” sounds very similar to the notion of a global electronic village based on collectivism, collaboration, and universal access, an updated version of the bourgeois public sphere, in practice, *Electronic Café* moved beyond that archetype. It embraced new tools while setting into critical relief the typical utopian prophecies of an idealized, electronically networked public of free-flowing individualized expression—still somewhat operational in *Satellite Arts* and *Hole in Space*—along with corporate-driven promises divorced from, or designed to obfuscate, power structures and broad political and ideological realities. It was a model of contentious relationality defined by the conscious transgression of existing geographic, racial, cultural, and technological demarcations through expanded communicative processes. *Electronic Café* at once engaged bourgeois ideals and departed from them, advancing a more self-critical, fragmented, and dialectical notion of the public sphere. As Negt and Kluge explain:

The bourgeois public sphere is anchored in the formal characteristics of communication; it can be described as a continuous historical progression, insofar as one focuses on the ideas that are concretized within it. But if, by contrast,

one takes its real substance as one's point of departure, it cannot be considered to be unified at all, but rather the aggregate of individual spheres that are only abstractly related. Television, the press, interest groups and political parties, parliament, army, public education, public chairs in the universities, the legal system, the industry of churches are only apparently fused into a general concept of the public sphere. In reality, this general, overriding public sphere runs parallel to these fields as a mere idea, and is exploited by the interests contained within each sphere, especially by the organized interests of the productive sector.¹⁴⁰

Modeling a technological practice of counterpublicity, *Electronic Café* compelled users to confront their own inscription within existing power structures, enlisting them as producers, receivers, and manipulators of content.

TECHNO-PUBLIC SPHERES

Broadly defined, the public sphere is made up of the instruments and spaces that organize such experiences and perspectives. As discussed in previous chapters, these tools and sites of communication and knowledge production include technical devices such as computers and televisions, as well as materials and institutions such as those listed by Negt and Kluge above. Together, these determine what they call “the social horizon of experience.”¹⁴¹ Any critical-transgressive activism must consider the means of production in this expanded sense as a struggle over the tools that dictate the future imaginary. Because such arrangements of collective experience are subject to power systems and to determined notions and rituals of subjectivity, community, identity, and history being amplified or repressed, they are inevitably bound to apparatuses of publicity, the mechanisms by which people both transmit and receive information, attitudes, and desires. In this sense, “technologies” constitute the public sphere. Thus, a critical utopian practice has to address pervasive myths of technological progressivism.

Galloway and Rabinowitz met in Paris in 1975, each working on expanding the City of Light's perpetual modernity through various electronic-communicative projects. They were introduced by the French philosopher Felix Guattari, himself deeply invested in tele-connective

activism. Guattari initially brought Rabinowitz to France on behalf of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs to show activists there what Americans had been doing with small portable video equipment, and the three remained in touch, later collaborating on a proposed Paris site of the forthcoming *Electronic Café International* (figure 3.19). All three shared an interest in social change and technology and were skeptical that the promise of telecommunicative connectivity would lead to material and intellectual emancipation. According to Guattari, revolution came not simply through more communication—“They talk, oh yes indeed, they talk all the time”—but rather through a specific type of communication, one that destroys “the domination of isolation.”¹⁴² Such communication would connect the fragmented communities of the dominated in their desire to overcome alienation and to create an image not of a future society but rather of “a collective competence” through “collective action.”¹⁴³

According to Galloway and Rabinowitz, *Electronic Café* was consciously modeled on a particular idea of the French coffeehouse as a site of critical public debate and a cradle of revolutionary action: “This was a new social institution. It took the idea of the café, as an informal human institution, and you could create revolution, and it was distributed. This was from the French model. There was poetry, revolution, all kinds of stuff. It was like the news used to be carried around by troubadours, where they traveled around with mandolins and told you what was going on.”¹⁴⁴ For these artists, the function of the new high-tech coffeehouse went beyond traditional accounts of the café’s role as part of the generation and transformation of the bourgeois public sphere, the ideal arena of an inclusive, autonomous critical exchange.¹⁴⁵ Deeply immersed at the time in the context of and discussion surrounding communication and power, they recognized that a simple reproduction of then-current communication structures based on a traditional notion of bourgeois publicity—predicated on what Miriam Hansen calls “formal conditions of communication (free association, equal participation, deliberation, polite argument)” —would not suffice.¹⁴⁶ Echoing contemporaneous sci-fi and utopia debates, writers and theorists such as Negt and Kluge, Guattari, Herbert Schiller, and Gene Youngblood cast a critical eye on myths of the democratization of culture through technological access and innovation. Schiller and Youngblood had close ties to the California art and



3.19

Kit Galloway, Sherrie Rabinowitz, and Felix Guattari, Paris, 1988. Courtesy Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive.

technology scene of those years: Schiller was a professor of communication at the UCSD, and Youngblood was a Los Angeles-based critic and professor at the California Institute of the Arts, who would become a close collaborator of Mobile Image. Both theorists took part in *Televiews*, a 1981 video-relay project at UCSD led by the artist Ulysses Jenkins. This project was closely monitored by Galloway and Rabinowitz, who later invited Jenkins to play a pivotal role in *Electronic Café* as an artist-in-residence at the Gumbo House location.

In a lecture as part of *Televiews*, Schiller warned of overly enthusiastic technological forecasts couched in terms of undifferentiated public access and ideals of liberation through technological innovation that promise flexibility, creativity, and control. In his 1976 book *Communication and Cultural Domination*, he had explicitly referred to mass media as “public” media, addressing the ideological dimension of how information is produced and disseminated.¹⁴⁷ If technology is perceived as just a set of devices—hence, as politically and ideologically neutral—it merely serves to relay the same messages produced elsewhere in society. New technology, Schiller explains, does not automatically produce a new society. Myths of ideological neutrality and universal benefit obscure the fact that “free flow” is “a one-way street for exercising domination by the already-powerful, is extended to technology—with the still greater likelihood of intensifying the dependency of the weaker parties.”¹⁴⁸

Like *Televiews*, *Electronic Café* aimed to reveal this dimension of the political utility of communication devices—the fact that, as Schiller put it, “technology is a social construct.”¹⁴⁹ Its futuristic consoles pointedly alluded to the facade of commercial techno-progressivism, while each also incorporated a live television feed—including news, entertainment, live events from the Olympic Games, and coverage of that year’s presidential campaign—whose imagery could be combined, juxtaposed, written on, and otherwise reprocessed and rebroadcast across the network. Users of the drawing tablets, slow-scan cameras, and other devices thus saw their own creations and manipulations continuously juxtaposed with those of a seemingly omnipotent media industry. Such an encounter with the mechanisms of information production and dissemination is crucial to fighting what Youngblood refers to as “the cultural imperialism of the mass media.”¹⁵⁰ Users became producers, appropriating, transforming,

and relaying the information and material they received, but the quality of their transmissions contrasted with prevailing modes of distribution based on conventional notions of a monolithic, all-encompassing sphere of idealized public exchange.

Whereas *Electronic Café* permitted people to utilize mass media and telecommunication technologies, the work did not simply provide a way to send out personal commentaries into some preset apparatus or abstract, uniform ether. It was not just a matter of access to broadcasting devices and channels so that people could participate in “free flow.” Rather, the nature of their communications was emphatically particularized, directed, and localized, enacted between various interdependent publics from specific café locations and according to continuously negotiated concerns that transcended predetermined categories of identity and experience. As the project made clear to users, the notion of a singular public was replaced by that of multifarious publics that were relational, specific, contested, and grounded in myriad overlapping sociopolitical contexts.

Similar to the German debates between Jürgen Habermas, Negt and Kluge, and other critics that had filled the feuilletons and university seminars since the late 1960s, US discussions regarding who partakes and how in the construction of perspectives, attitudes, and policies were centered around questions of what constitutes a body politic in the context of new social movements, advancements in communication technologies, and increasingly deregulated economies, all engaging in a struggle over greater varieties of seeing and being in the world. As discussed in relation to *Hole in Space*, 1980s writers such as Manuel Castells and Rosalyn Deutsche historicized and politicized the concept of the public sphere, its contemporary function, and art’s role within it. This discourse, to which *Electronic Café* relates, inherently involved the politics of participation in the production of knowledge, information, and experience. As feminist, postcolonial, and urbanist critiques sought to politicize the myths of the democratic makings of culture, two crucial notions emerged. The first was that there never was just one single public and thus not only one public sphere, one horizon of experience. Second, if there are multiple publics, how are they constituted and what is the relation between them, between, as Haraway put it, “us” and “them”? What constitutes a “we” in relation to other constituencies, to other bodies, and how can these relationships

be emancipatory and avoid the reproduction of the exclusive, hegemonic structures of public and private, center and margin, self and other that are at the core of the logic of neoliberal inequality?

As Mary P. Ryan, Nancy Fraser, and Michael Warner articulated in their respective discussions of the 1989 English-language publication of Habermas's seminal *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the "political ideal of open, inclusive, and effective deliberation about matters of common and critical concern" was always dependent on *exclusions*, by the demand that in order to act as a *public* citizens would leave *private* matters and concerns at the door.¹⁵¹ As a consequence, women, whose concerns, bodies, and experiences were consigned to the "domestic," and other groups, whose gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, or culture were deemed to be "personal" rather than social concerns, were effectively denied access to and representation at those sites and forums where all that is actually or ostensibly relevant to all members of society would be subject to deliberation and, consequently, materialize in the form of official and unofficial policies and resources serving the "public good." In her nineteenth-century history of the US public sphere, Ryan shows that it has been the "imperfect public" of "working men, immigrants, African-Americans, [and] women" that has driven the evolution of institutions and discourses of "American public life" rather than the supposedly autonomous and accessible bourgeois public sphere persistently idealized in theories and practices of democratic agency.¹⁵² Fraser, in turn, argues that multiple, competing publics are desirable precisely because they challenge the purported autonomy that serves the (private) interests of those dominant groups who benefit from a lack of public discussion of questions of ownership, capital, exploitation, and labor. For instance, as Fraser explains, "if questions of workplace democracy are labeled 'economic' or 'managerial' problems and if discourse about these questions is shunted into specialized institutions associated with, say, 'industrial relations' sociology, labor law, and 'management science,' then this serves to perpetuate class (and usually gender and race) dominance and subordination."¹⁵³ Contestation, Fraser argues, is the key function of "subaltern counterpublics"—"parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."¹⁵⁴ If

the ideas and perspectives produced by the dominant institutions and apparatuses of the public sphere are thus necessarily partial yet prescriptive, if they clash with but (in)form the knowledges and experiences of those individual and social subjectivities excluded from officially contributing to the general horizon of social experience, then what is the quality, the politics of the relations between the various spheres and groups, between a contested multiplicity of outlooks, needs, and desires, between “imposed narratives” and “true stories,” between constructed and “genuine” images, imaginaries, and corporealities? As Haraway argues, we need to historicize knowledge and critique the technological modes by which meaning is produced while committing to faithful accounts of a “real” world.¹⁵⁵ To assign greater or any singular notion of “objectivity” to one particular knowledge or experience over another runs the risk of playing into the hands of existing power, especially during the Reagan era when “any collective historical subject that dares to resist the stripped-down atomism of Star Wars, hypermarket, postmodern, media-simulated citizenship” was dismissed as a “special-interest group” and thus easily policed in the realms where what does and does not count as relevant knowledge is ascertained.¹⁵⁶ The goal is to overcome the very logic of public and private that is at the core of hegemonic ideals and practices of the traditional public sphere and its institutions and apparatuses of publicity, of mediation and representation, and the ways in which it translates into social and ideological dynamics of “common” knowledge versus embodied experience, of us versus them.

The struggle for what Haraway calls “feminist objectivity [which] means quite simply *situated knowledges*”—hence, the ongoing, historically specific negotiation of individual and social subjecthood—finds its powerful correlate in the critical race and postcolonial debates of the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁵⁷ Authors such as bell hooks, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Homi Bhabha theorized material and immaterial spaces and positionings that resisted the binary of assimilation and segregation/separation.¹⁵⁸ As hooks put it, “To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body.”¹⁵⁹ As for Fraser, this positioning on the periphery bore the potential for contestation. hooks framed marginality as “more than a site of deprivation” but one of “radical possibility, a space of resistance”: “It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from

which to see and create, to imagine alternative, new worlds. This is not a mythic notion of marginality, it comes from lived experience.”¹⁶⁰ Yet, as hooks emphasizes, this space does not exist apart from but rather in reciprocally determining relationality to the center and thus, as a site of critical engagement and emancipation, of transformation, does not and cannot insist on/reproduce the mythical autonomy and active depoliticization that defines the exclusionary mechanisms of the bourgeois public sphere: “I want to note that I am not trying to romantically re-inscribe the notion of that space of marginality where the oppressed live apart from their oppressors as ‘pure.’”¹⁶¹ The margin becomes, in turn, a space of radical openness: “As a radical standpoint, perspective, position, ‘the politics of location’ necessarily calls those of us who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of re-vision . . . For many of us, that movement requires pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex, and class domination, . . . We return to ‘identity’ and ‘culture’ for relocation, linked to political practice—identity that is not informed by the narrow cultural nationalism masking the continued fascination with the power of the white hegemonic order.”¹⁶² Here, difference, as an oppressive imposition as well as a potential for emancipation, is constructed, historical, relational; the key is to recognize the real as determined by the imagined, and to reimagine and reconstruct the real beyond its existing imaginary confines. As Bhabha elaborates: “What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.”¹⁶³ These in-between spaces are where public and private, knowledge and experience, center and margin connect and determine one another. They are the sites and moments where, as Negt and Kluge put it, “the real social experiences of human beings, produced in everyday life and work cut across such divisions.”¹⁶⁴ The only originality or objectivity—the only horizon there is—is the dialectic of knowledge and experience, of that which ought to be and how the ideas and ideals of our world are

being felt, perceived, experienced in particular and overlapping everyday context and circumstances. There is no “god-trick,” as Haraway calls it, no outside position to be safely taken; the general horizon of social experience, the public sphere as “the act of defining the idea of society itself,” needs to be acknowledged, theorized, and performed as this dialectic of the in-between, of “situated knowledges.”

Technology, and communications technology in particular, is crucial to publicity and positionings. In Habermas’s account of the bourgeois public sphere’s detrimental demise, apparatuses of human connectivity provide the means to transcend the limits of geographic and physical confines, while scientific progress allows for an ever-expanding, rational assessment of the workings of the world. To Haraway, technology provides the opportunity to (re)connect perception to the body, or rather a multiplicity of bodies, to politicize vision and mobility as they are tethered to individual physicalities and social corporealities, to locales and sites, streets and schools, bedrooms and boardrooms, archives and carnivals, and to the tools of transmission and transportation themselves. As such, technology never fully transcends; it generates only partial, never absolute, knowledge or authentic experience. Thus, one connects and is connected only ever in relation to. This is “preferred positioning”: “partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibilities of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology.”¹⁶⁵

As opposed to the ostensibly polite and objective (read: disembodied) deliberations of the public sphere, the situated knowledges of counter-publicity demand and depend on engaging the physical presence of its constituencies. And, as Haraway suggests, the body politic(s) of a critical electronic urban public space provide(s) opportunities to connect the corporeal and the immaterial in a progressive, critical utopian manner. In her 2005 assessment of what she calls “the new urban spatiality,” sociologist Saskia Sassen discusses the overlaid and interconnected economies of digital and material networks “as cities and urban regions are increasingly traversed by non-local circuits,” raising the question, “what is urban place in this context?” The result of this inquiry is a “repositioning of architecture, planning, and urbanism generally, *as forms of knowledge and forms of practice*.”¹⁶⁶ The destabilizing effects and the rescaling of “the local” brought about by the “complex imbrications between the digital and the

non-digital” favor economic relations of monetary growth and urban development when networks of information and capital are able to move freely, unencumbered by material boundaries and entities. As Sassen explains, “Hyper-mobility and de-materialization are usually seen as mere functions of the new [communications] technologies. This understanding erases the fact that it takes multiple material conditions to achieve this outcome and that it takes social networks not only digital ones.”¹⁶⁷ The displacements and labor needed to make these networks viable remain largely invisible, as do the bodies forcibly mobilized and exploited, a condition exacerbated by the aesthetic, economic, and ideological privileging of the digital circuit as inherently progressive. Echoing some of the critiques offered by Manuel Castells and others discussed in chapter 2, Sassen focuses on the complexity of intra- and interurban “networked sub-economies operating partly in actual and partly in globe-spanning digital space” benefitting the flow of capital and goods, forcing a de-territorialized and decontextualized and increasingly alienating reconfiguration of select multiple “locals” no longer defined by traditional boundaries and notions of “neighborhood” but using place as resource where and whenever desirable.¹⁶⁸ Without explicitly articulating it, Sassen’s analysis suggests a counterpublic *Umfunktionierung* of the subeconomic model, generating new forms of knowledge and practice made available by the strategic appropriation of technologies typically cast as vehicles of fabled transcendence, but here reconceived as tools for reimagining networks and constellations of bodies, information, territory, and agency.¹⁶⁹

The suppression of the material and physical from the logic of the new urban spatiality recalls the very foundations of the bourgeois public sphere as described by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in their 1986 study *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*.¹⁷⁰ According to the authors, by the late seventeenth century, the European coffeehouse had been established as a space where democratic access and conduct was equated with a particular type of decorum and etiquette, “synthesiz[ing] aspects of both upper-class and protestant morality with respect to clean living and refinement.”¹⁷¹ Its privileging of “de-libidinated” encounters, manners, tone, and behavior—stratified more often than not according to differences in class, gender, race, to bodies and locales, education and socialization—effectively instituted parameters of public control (and

control of the public, the body politic). The coffeehouse institutionalized a “protestant ethic,” in which the regulation of the “unruly” body is a prerequisite for participation in the public sphere.¹⁷² Following Habermas’s account of the transformation of the public sphere via the privatization of public spaces and media, this regulation extends far beyond the sites and occasions designated for rational discourse, beyond deliberation itself, to all spaces of representation and performance that produce and reproduce individual and social subjects and subjectivities, the relations and conduct among selves and bodies. As Sassen explains, technologies of communication and mediation have at once irrevocably destabilized conventional urban relations and reinforced the dominance of economic “centers,” now redefined as combinations of “capital fixity and hypermobility.”¹⁷³ Such technologies extend what Stallybrass and White call the “re-alignment of place, body, status, and discourse” by strategically connecting specific sites, spheres, and “clienteles,” while conveniently ignoring and actively marginalizing others.¹⁷⁴

Certain artists and activists have struggled to re-function these instruments to not only reassert the material and corporeal dimension of visual representation, information exchange, and knowledge production but also—and in light of the much discussed transition from a Fordist to post-Fordist economy, from material to increasingly immaterial labor, including the making of lifestyles as much as the realms of domestic, reproductive, and care labor—imagine and put forward new modes and presences of being. This critical-fantastic assertion of existing and newly created corporealities and networks, or subeconomies, was at the heart of select projects and practices contemporaneous with *Electronic Café*. *The Peoples of Los Angeles*, for example, was also commissioned for the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival. Created by Werkgruppe, a collective founded by artist Daniel Martinez and cultural theorist D. Emily Hicks, the work consisted of nine sculptural forms, each containing a forty-five-second holographic “portrait,” exhibited at the USC Atelier gallery. In one, a factory worker was shown dancing with his mother in front of a group of friends and relatives. In another, a man named Jesus wore a rainbow outfit and alternately played a guitar and carved a wooden cross.¹⁷⁵ According to writer Susan Otto, “The artists’ plan was to interface cutting-edge image technology with the ancient practice of oral stories . . . Various people

of disparate race and class positions retold personal narratives, which were immediately translated into nine languages and intimately heard through suspended headphones.” To accomplish this, Werkgruppe developed a “mobile holography unit”—a special camera designed by physicist Lloyd Cross, mounted on a customized wheelchair—that could be brought throughout the city to film people on-site, in their homes, and on their neighborhood streets. Located in the Santa Monica Place shopping mall, USC Atelier was selected because it presented a fashionable “public location for meeting and commerce.”¹⁷⁶ This “documentation of people’s lives,” as Hicks called it, inserted bodies of popular culture into public space, bodies often overlooked or otherwise marginalized in and by its location and the institutions (artistic, commercial, etc.) represented by it. The work at once expanded public space and its constituencies (and clientele) and challenged its logic and utility.

To Martinez, the work was a strategic intrusion into the urban imaginary, part of a practice that sought “direct action and intervention into the landscape, into the aesthetics, into the politics.”¹⁷⁷ Like Haraway’s cyborgs, these bodies are the “illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism.” Yet, as subjects who refuse to adhere to the confines of modern subjectivity/subjecthood and its reification as Other, they have the potential to resist it.¹⁷⁸ They are both social reality and fiction. These bodies are neither the locus of polite debate in the ideal bourgeois sense nor easily identified and catered to as consumers and hence confined to social, psychological, and corporeal containers and categories of individuality and subjectivity. Thus, they are not easily controlled and surveilled in and through the discrete spaces of public and private, of consumption, work, and home, neighborhoods, peripheries, and centers. Although Haraway’s cyborg is an explicitly feminist paradigm, it represents a *politics* of resistance that applies to any bodies, past, present, and future that, as she puts it, “have no truck with . . . seduction to organic wholeness . . . , the ‘West’s’ escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space.”¹⁷⁹ In a similar spirit, Werkgruppe sought to transgress the distinctions between bodies and images, between material and immaterial entities and spaces as discrete, originary sites of defining and managing expectations, attitudes, and experiences. As Otto explains about the work: “The hologram, which can be

seen from 360 degrees at all times, allows multiple points of opinion and perspective at once. The holographic narrative is not linear—it mimics a circle, or continuous play. Like the Mexican codex, it allows participants to jump in and out of the narrative at any place. Sound was used as vibration and texture, in a physical sense, in a composition of antitonal structure and movement. It was choreographed to pass from corner to corner throughout the physical space. Layered within this, the machine's motors whirled like insects."¹⁸⁰ The "creatures," to borrow Haraway's term, are not easily confined; they are slippery, partial, multiple, "fluid, being both material and opaque," obvious in their construction and playfully perverse in the performance of their reconstruction.¹⁸¹ They speak several languages and make literal their objectification as sites of ideological projection. Their voices mix with the sounds of the machine, of "insects": "The boundary between physical and non-physical is very imprecise for us," declares Haraway.¹⁸² The mall, a site for the affirmation of the modern subject through the exercise of public engagement performed and regulated in and through the commodification of participation, choice, and freedom, is turned into a site of carnivalesque defiance. In Sassen's terms, technology provided both a spectacle of the local and the model for a new subeconomy of knowledge and practice through a complex constellation of materially and ideologically expanded bodies and spaces.

A similar politics of transgression, of what Haraway calls "leaky distinctions,"¹⁸³ can be found in the work of performance and video artist Ulysses Jenkins, a friend of Martinez's and the official artist-in-residence at *Electronic Café's* Gumbo House location. Jenkins had worked with Senga Nengundi, Maren Hassinger, Barbara McCullough, Frank Parker, and David Hammons in the late 1970s and early 1980s, creating urban interventions, occupying and transforming places through ritualistic movement, literally and metaphorically struggling to find new forms of being in space. Such work sought to confront and transcend the ways in which the presence of certain bodies in certain spaces had been depoliticized in Roland Barthes's sense, that is, mythologized through habitual seeing, an affirmation of the hegemonic aesthetic logics (and economics) of race, gender, class, and site.¹⁸⁴ For Jenkins, such mythologizations were embroiled in the media and its technologies of representation and dissemination. The artist was concerned with how not merely to substitute

one image or myth for another but rather to politicize the given as well as the potential function of bodies in space. “Our work is political,” Jenkins explains, “and the politics [are] us being ourselves.”¹⁸⁵

Jenkins’s *Dream City* (1981) was both a performance and a video work, comprising a succession of fifteen-minute actions by different artists. As described by the curators of “Now Dig This!: Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–80”: “This almost twenty-four-hour event presented to a paying audience involved performers from various backgrounds, including Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans, among them fellow artists Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi. Multiple characters and objects interact in a fantastical dream state, linked through a story being told aloud.”¹⁸⁶ A crucial aspect of the work was the creation of a feedback loop: at the commencement of each participant’s performance, video recordings of prior segments were played back. This produced a sense of surveillance while instilling an awareness of a technics of representation and mediation, both circular and as a site for departure and transformation.¹⁸⁷ Communications and imagin(in)g technology, “the reconstruction of how an image is seen, how to produce a new point of view,” as Jenkins puts it, was to be a central component of the work.¹⁸⁸ Staged in part as a response to the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, both the performances and the culminating video articulated a critique of and a desire to surmount the limits of the kinds of fantasies then serving as guides for an urban life to come: the “dream” in *Dream City* refers to the “American dream” as much as it does to the longing for something not yet become. The video shows an assemblage of settings and performing bodies; people dance, read poetry, play music, and enact other activities—from the mundane to the seemingly spiritualistic—some in the studio, others in a concert hall or out in the street. Evocative images bleed in and out: shots of the Los Angeles and New York skylines; an empty corporate boardroom; churning oil pumps. Everything is bathed in technologically enhanced psychedelic colors that give things a glow of artificiality and, like the array of sounds, transgress discrete scenes, blurring boundaries between people and objects and their surroundings. Jenkins himself appears nude except for a Pharaonic headdress and an amulet around his neck (figure 3.20); he is a shamanic figure conjuring both an ancient past and an (Afro)futurist tomorrow. He stands next to a push mower, ready to



cut and provide the ground for new growth. Referring to himself as a griot, a West African storyteller, poet, and musician, a keeper of oral history and tradition, Jenkins announces a future reckoning with truth that will effect real estate, “investments and stockholders,” and “psychological equity.” The city referred to in the work’s title is depicted as a heterogeneous network of styles, spaces, activities, people, identities, and technologies, not blended in a multicultural melting pot but rather competing with and complementing each other in a freewheeling and cacophonous hallucination, a place both concrete and elusive.

Through such works, Jenkins effectively presents a new economy, a new set of relations of selfhood production. *Dream City* feels like an

3.20

Ulysses Jenkins, *Dream City*, video still,
1981. Courtesy Ulysses Jenkins.

appropriation of a vaudeville tradition, which, as Aria Dean writes in her insightful discussion of Jenkins's work, is a source of the "image problem" of Blackness, a place of minstrel and blackface where African American images and culture have been "manipulated and misused . . . in order to distort society's understanding of black life."¹⁸⁹ The image problem with regard to "blackness" is not, Dean explains, that the image "fails to correspond to reality, but that the image has partly crafted reality," that Blackness itself is an image. This problem operates in multiple directions, challenging the authority of both clear-cut identity categories and "black art" as a form of resistance. As Dean points out, "Jenkins and his Los Angeles contemporaries . . . were often accused of making art that was not political enough or 'black enough' due to their interest in new media and abstraction and their willingness to draw on sources from outside of the black tradition." For these artists, the task of a critical emancipatory artistic practice cannot be to replace a false or fraught representation with a new or "truer" one, thus perpetuating the objectification and commodification/fetishization of the Black subject, but rather to change the logic of subjecthood altogether, moving, as Jenkins did, toward "a non-ontological blackness." If, in a culture defined by racial oppression, "the black" is always already an impure other, an "impure product," it is the nature (or naturalization) of the thing that has to be transformed, the very process of reification that must be subverted.¹⁹⁰ In earlier works such as *Mass of Images* (1978; figure 3.21), *Two Zone Transfer* (1979), and *Just Another Rendering of the Same Old Problem* (1979), Jenkins's singular body becomes the locus of multiplicity, mutilation, and defiance, a narrator of his own subjection to mass mediation. "He has renounced his desire to just be himself," Dean explains. "Jenkins has renounced actual being for an acceptance of the *historical* being, the 'ontological totality.' He has already 'consent[ed] not to be a single being.'"¹⁹¹ With *Dream City*, this "n/ontology" expands to the collective body of blackness and beyond. Even the collective fantastic subject will no longer be available for reification through codes of color. But, like the city, this body is neither "multicultural" nor "post-racial"—it is an impure "no-thing-ness," a personal and social being as evolving construct, as process. *Dream City* features a merry-go-round, a literal and symbolic allusion to the fair and the fairground, past and potentially future sites of a struggle over the autonomy and control of



the body politic. As Jonathan Crary describes, whereas the modern carnivalesque retains some sense of destabilized identities, power structures, and divisions between spectator and performer, its “topsy-turvy world” has been divided off from the rationalized economic life of the city.¹⁹² In *Dream City*, Jenkins refuses to segregate performing bodies from one another and from the electronic and physical space of the urban public and its population, while also refusing to bracket off art from the mediated and material experience of the everyday. The work does not provide a relegate-able resolution, a newly fixed embodiment of a fantastic constituency in space. The prophet remains ambivalent about the outlook: utopia

3.21

Ulysses Jenkins, *Mass of Images*, video still,
1978. Courtesy Ulysses Jenkins.

or dystopia depend on the process, the performance to come, not the (im)pure product of an existing technological and cultural logic.

In a similar sense, *Electronic Café* was less about establishing distinct sites for rational discourse than about creating a fairground-like experience, a carnivalesque place of interacting bodies and blurred boundaries, of often-marginalized peoples, of expansive performances and visionary materializations of past and future selves. This high-tech “café” was, in Stallybrass and White’s terms, more tavern than coffeehouse, precisely the kind of place against which the bourgeois public sphere—with its antiseptic spaces for “refined” (read: disembodied) discussion—had been defined.¹⁹³ Or, more precisely, *Electronic Café* placed the coffeehouse in dialogue with the tavern. As mentioned, Günter’s was explicitly modeled on the traditional coffeehouse, understood as “a forum for the arts and serious political discussion,” while the three other restaurant locations were decidedly more “proletarian,” popular places where the (racialized) body could not be denied or transcended: the “very rural, Korean-only” 8th Street Restaurant; the Gumbo House, decorated in an array of beer signs; the “all-Mexican” Ana Maria, with its old-country murals and waitresses in “peasant” dresses (figure 3.22). Adding to the fairground-like atmosphere, many *Electronic Café* participants staged live musical events, readings, poetry slams, and oral histories, bodies gathering on-site to give voice to and perform within and beyond given traditions, memories, and experiences. Others, in turn, uploaded images and narratives culled from private and public collections and archives in an attempt to document and speculate on how technological rendering functions as a device of both control and emancipation, sometimes presenting an image as a stifling confirmation of existing visual and ideological conventions, at other times as a platform for unexpected appearances, new presences, and affirmations of joyfully frenzied constructs of selves.

The network’s central image database, the optical-disk extension of the original text-based Community Memory system, was an especially rich locus of such counterpublic endeavors, where intentional and sporadic contributions and uploads spawned a series of carnivalesque juxtapositions and composites. Examining this image archive, one finds an array of performances—some staged and rehearsed, others seemingly spontaneous—featuring costumes, masks, sets, encounters, overlapping



and overlaid fictional theatrics, and documentary materials. One of the most crucial aspects of this archive is that the difference between the purposefully constructed and the experienced is at times difficult to distinguish, causing an overall tension between the two, revealing their relationality as a dynamic, as a logic between real images and mediated reality. Rather than simply used as a platform for what would be considered proper public content and conduct, *Electronic Café* served as a site for the performance of transformation and transgressions, at times indistinguishably blending place and spaces, the physical and the virtual, the found and the made. One sequence of stills shows a young Latino man transforming himself into a clown, sitting in front of a mirror, carefully applying makeup, and putting on a wig and a hat. At some point, the screen

3.22

Mobile Image, *Electronic Café*, Ana Maria site (East LA), 1984. Courtesy Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive.

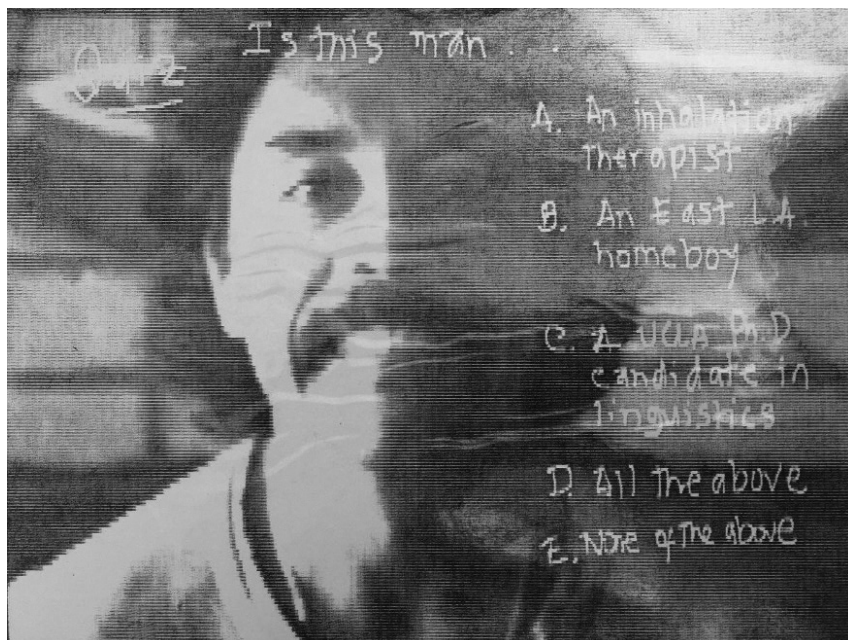
splits into four asynchronous parts, blurring the moment between before and after, between reality, image, mask, dress, and role, while the viewer and performer encounter one another in the mirror, alluding to the instruments of seeing oneself and seeing someone else. The clown then leaves the room to walk into Ana Maria, mingling and posing with the guests who, in turn, look at the camera and at the viewer in front of the painted and sculpted walls of a restaurant designed to provide an intimacy and familiarity through a presentness of tradition. Preceding this chain of images are scanned cover art and announcements for the techno-punk band Nervous Gender and photographs of small children, a car with a smashed front, and a person in a t-shirt printed with a bull's-eye. Another sequence juxtaposes superimposed faces and features typically used to inscribe and ascribe places of origin and belonging, images of casual, joyful dancing recorded on-site in one of the restaurants, and close-up soft-core images of male genitalia.

Produced on-site and retrievable at the various nodes, such imagery would have further contrasted with the live television feeds that were a part of each console and which were dominated by the two big news stories of the moment: the 1984 presidential campaign and the Olympic Games—the latter also being the sponsor of *Electronic Café*. Both the President and the Games appear in the archive; one notable example features a screenshot of Reagan scratching his head. On top of this image, someone scrawled “Health, Housing, Education. YES. NO,” a snap poll intended for others in the network. Yet, even when users did not explicitly incorporate these topics, they were continuously present, both as general context and as television broadcast. The montage of performances, bodies, texts, and images that was *Electronic Café* clashed with the controlled multiculturalism of the Olympics, with their composed, choreographed, uniformed, classical-humanist bodies that speak only to publicly accepted notions of physical health, social care, and competition on a level playing field. Such notions broadly aligned with the ideals of the Reagan era, with its neoliberal relegation of public health problems such as the AIDS crisis to a conveniently segregable sphere and idea of the “private” (private bodies, private sex, private problems) absent from public view and concern. Other sequences preserved in the *Electronic Café* archive include a performance at the Gumbo House featuring what looks like the

reenactment of a ritual dance complete with traditional outfits, a display that functions as a Black counternarrative to the humanist-Eurocentric history embodied by the Olympic spectacle, as well as a critical reflection on the conventions of seeing that identify particular bodies, clothes, and movements as those of particular identities. This dynamic is underscored by stills showing the Black audience members at the Gumbo House, who appear to turn their gazes from the camera to the bodies in front of the console, working the instruments that both dematerialize and inscribe presence and experience. Similarly, at the 8th Street Restaurant, a masked figure is seen holding various objects up to the camera: first a Korean book on shaman ritual ceremony, then a skull, then an image of a nuclear bomb. A final shot of someone directly facing the skull as if deep in conversation slowly gives way to an image of the baldheaded Nosferatu, the 1979 version of the vampire played by Klaus Kinski. This sequence constitutes another estranging, poetic rumination on the oppressive and liberating powers of the dynamics of the material and immaterial dimensions of being as historical construct. The several celebratory transgressions of gender stereotypes likewise affirm the overall counterpublic force of the *Electronic Café* project, as historical figures in anachronistically extravagant dress are mixed with brightly colored faces that sport exaggerated lips, cheeks, and eyes and other features that in their exaltation no longer conform to assigned markers of difference. The normative is revealed as a matter of historical specificity and relativity, and the trans-body functions as a progressive politics of the subject, of any subject and subjects and the choice to conform or refuse to be confined to the spaces, forms, and expectations ascribed to them.

As the one explicitly institutional location in the network, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles played a distinct role in Mobile Image's attempt to model a form of counterpublicity rather than solely expand on the existing spaces and dynamics of the bourgeois public sphere. The museum served as a somewhat ironic affirmation of the institutionalization of the struggle over the general horizon of social experience. Functioning as both a node and as a designated space for the accumulation, exhibition, and contemplation of the materials produced and exchanged in the network, it was there that those materials were most prominently collected, rematerialized, and displayed. Along with

one of the consoles, the central image database was located in a mezzanine area off the lobby, and visitors to the museum were invited to peruse, add to, work on, and print out the contributions gathered on the server and tack them to the wall. Although these activities were present at all of the project's locations, MOCA was the only site inherently pre-inscribed as supra-local, hence designated as public, and thus seemingly subject to different rules of engagement than its distinctly neighborhood-based nodes. Photographs show numerous people who ostensibly came to see the museum's presentations of publicly relevant cultural artifacts working at the terminal among vast numbers of printouts. Those who would have ordinarily been designated (and self-identified) as "visitors" became producers. The wall collages of impressions and expressions, memories and imaginaries, emphatically juxtaposed the various self-assumed, socially ascribed, and culturally specificity publics with one another and with an official public institution of supposed collective relevance. They also foregrounded the constructedness of subjectivity itself. Users from the other sites also visited the museum in person to experience and partake in the arrangement and rearrangement of materials there. The results ranged from simple horizontal series and playfully chaotic clusters to coherent forms. One accumulation combined the aforementioned image of Reagan with the poll superimposed over his face with documentation of a visiting African dignitary at the Gumbo House and a General Motors advertisement that read "Nobody sweats the details like GM." Another contained a magazine cover featuring the story of an East LA "assault with a deadly weapon" with a series of Mexican vintage postcards and an *Electronic Café*-produced headshot of a man with another poll, asking: "Is this man . . . A. An inhalation therapist B. An East LA homeboy C. A UCLA PhD candidate in linguistics D. All the above E. None of the above" (figure 3.23). Another was a composite recreation of one of the other, restaurant-based consoles, stitched together from more than twenty eight-by-ten printouts. Most vividly, two enormous humanoid constellations were constructed from individual body-part images produced in the network. These figures, resisting normative markers of race, gender, and sexuality, towered over the space: in one arrangement, two bodies clad in fetish fashion were mounted with their backs facing the viewer, either walking away or pressed up against the wall (figure 3.24);



in the other a composite figure was stretched out to absurd proportions, arms held out wide in a gesture of embrace, flight, and proud self-display (figure 3.25). The counterpublic body was thus materialized: cyborgs composed of but not limited to their parts, each engaging with and defined by the ones next to it and the overall constellation without being subsumed by a preordained totality or meaning. Such a being is counterpublic in its historically specific process as it forms sporadically, strategically, politically according to particular present and future needs, not a product outside or substitute for itself. Thus, not surprisingly, the museum was unwilling or unable to maintain or contain this body and other assemblages similarly produced on-site. Without consulting Mobile Image, and

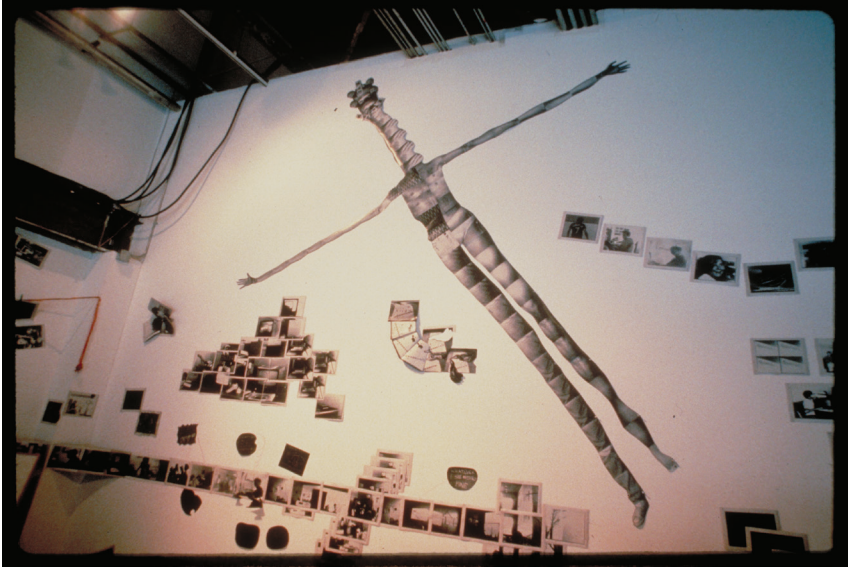
3.23

Mobile Image, *Electronic Café*, printout,
1984. Courtesy Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive.



3.24

Mobile Image, *Electronic Café*, Museum of Contemporary Art location, 1984. Courtesy Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive.



much to the artists' consternation, MOCA simply tore them down and dumped them in the trash at the end of the show's run.

ELECTRONIC COUNTERPUBLIC

Electronic Café engaged, at least in part, the same cultural and communicative crisis articulated in contemporaneous theories of postmodernism, particularly those that focused on an increasingly technologized world. Along with Jameson, late 1970s and early 1980s writers such as Jean Baudrillard and Jean-Francois Lyotard characterized post-1960s society as one dominated by computerization, electronic information, media

3.25

Mobile Image, *Electronic Café*, Museum of Contemporary Art location, 1984. Courtesy Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive.

spectacle, and multinational capitalism, resulting in a dissolution of subjectivity and authentic expression and the disappearance of a productive public sphere. To Baudrillard, the pandemic spread of advanced communication networks had ushered in a narcissistic era, in which consumers exist in isolation. The domestic space had become “a living satellite,” a thoroughly privatized space where users merely send and receive signals. Life thus becomes empty, experienced only via screens and terminals, and “the real itself appears as a large useless body.”¹⁹⁴ Whereas alienation once motivated opposition and resistance, all is now subsumed, in Baudrillard’s mournful view, by an illusory freedom via a “pornography of information,” abundant, fluid, and free-flowing.

Somewhat less bleak, the critiques by Lyotard and Jameson offer similar assessments but with at least some potential for certain kinds of agency. To Lyotard, “computerized society” is marked by a disintegration of grand narratives, with no possibility for either universal consensus or the establishment of a “pure” alternative to the current system. This “postmodern condition” emerges alongside an increasing concentration of power in the hands of those who control information and thus the economic system and knowledge production itself. In response, Lyotard calls for a “quite simple” solution to the problem of computerization: free public access to memory and data banks, which would enable a multiplicity of open discussions and self-conscious moments of consensus informed by inexhaustible reserves of information.¹⁹⁵ Jameson speaks specifically to the “aesthetic dilemma” facing the postmodern artist: in a technologized society drained of authenticity and subjectivity, it is no longer clear what the function of art is.¹⁹⁶ Mass culture responds with pastiche, epitomized by the science-fiction movie *Star Wars* (1977), with its appropriation of bygone forms in nostalgic revival of a prior generation’s future imaginings. The only viable option for “high art,” according to Jameson, is for practitioners to speak through “dead styles,” rendering art a rumination on itself.¹⁹⁷ Indeed, so much art of the period was understood in those very terms.¹⁹⁸

Mobile Image concurred with some of these core diagnoses—the saturation of society by prepackaged broadcast content, the excessive privatization of communication, the persistence of myths of technological progress and illusions of freedom, and the resulting threat to an operational public sphere. But they rejected the nihilism epitomized by

Baudrillard's theory, even as they openly rebutted industry-peddled promises of surefire social progress. To them, telecommunication networks were neither inherently democratizing nor part of a totalizing spectacle of control that leaves the user helpless to intervene.

Yet, crucially, *Electronic Café* represented an approach that was also distinct from the constructive options presented by theorists such as Jameson and Lyotard. Along with his call for increased access, the latter saw works of art as symbolic of budding sensibilities and thus capable of eliciting philosophical reflection on a computerized age. In 1985, Lyotard cocurated "Les Immatériaux," a landmark multimedia exhibition at the Centre Pompidou meant to highlight the bewildering and destabilizing effects of emergent technologies—as he put it, the "incertitude about the identity of the human individual in his condition of such improbable immateriality."¹⁹⁹ Focusing on conventional mediums such as painting and film, Jameson abided by a similar conception of cultural production as symbol, whether a pastiche that encapsulates the postmodern or a reflexive re-presentation of the inauthenticity of artistic expression itself. For both thinkers, the artist is fundamentally a producer of images—material or immaterial—that embody current conditions and potentially provoke contemplation.

Electronic Café offered a very different mode of artistic production: a participatory and open-ended social labor that both raised consciousness about the politics of technology and modeled ways to use it to effect social transformation. Participants glimpsed a counter-technological order, in which they could not only transmit their personal expressions and localized concerns but also partake in complex relations of struggle and negotiation. Alongside personal stories and calls for peaceful coexistence, exchanges about electoral politics, activism, religion, pornography, sexism, and other topics proliferated on the Community Memory bulletin board. "The person that entered the 'Nobody for President' obviously is very cynical and without hope," read one post. "I would like to enter into dialogue with him/her." "Why is it that no one admits they are a sexist?" asked another, to which someone responded, "Because they are not sure of their gender." At one point, a participant transmitted pictures and a narrative of himself having been beaten by police, triggering a discussion about police brutality against Black people in Los Angeles. Even as new bonds were forming, additional conflicts were emerging,

such as the aforementioned exchange between the poets. These interactions enabled a vision not of a communalist utopia of frictionless communication but rather of critical and productive fantasy as a subversive, mobilizing process for challenging present ideological and material arrangements.

Hence, *Electronic Café* belongs not only to the history of techno-activism but also to the legacy of post-Minimalist aesthetics, particularly conceptual art, which was at least partially defined by an increased emphasis on what Alexander Alberro describes as “the possibilities of publicness and distribution.”²⁰⁰ When artists and critics of the late 1960s sought the dematerialization of the art object, it was not solely to overcome the restrictive commodification imposed by aestheticized, physical form. It was also to enable and demand participation, an opening up of art that, as Lucy Lippard and John Chandler put it in 1967, offers a “curious kind of Utopianism” whose “tabula rasa” would provoke a thinking through of ideas determined by the artwork as a catalyst or device wielded by those experiencing it.²⁰¹ According to Sol LeWitt, the idea “becomes the machine that makes the art,” conjuring a technological metaphor that posits the viewer as an integral, ideally active part of the imaginative process.²⁰² And because, in this conceptualist schema, ideas are always shared and meaning created in that process, aesthetic production is ostensibly depersonalized—and therefore accessible, participatory, and public, upending hierarchical notions of skill and authorship in favor of communicative action. According to Benjamin Buchloh, however, this apparent democratization of means ultimately turned into a de facto “structural relationship of absolute equivalents,” in which the quantity of information exchanged supplanted the potentially critical quality of aesthetic experience. Consequently, Buchloh argues, conceptualist works often replicated rather than transgressed the late-capitalist “logic of administration,” thus reinforcing the institutions in which art serves as a mechanism for merely symbolic liberation, in which “artistic production is transformed into a tool of ideological control and cultural legitimation.”²⁰³

Electronic Café can be understood as having heeded but not succumbed to Buchloh’s critique. The work relates to several artistic practices of the 1970s that built on conceptualism but challenged some of its core tenets. In particular, *Electronic Café* resembles what Alberro calls

an “antithetical model,” exemplified by post-conceptualist artists such as Martha Rosler, Fred Lonidier, Allan Sekula, and Phel Steinmetz, who, with their activist, photo- and text-heavy practices, set out to show that “self-determination and communication, even in advanced forms of capitalist control, is still a historical option and artistic possibility.”²⁰⁴ What differentiates their work from that of other more pessimistic peers is that it critiques systems of representation for their ideological foundations while also reasserting the possibility to intervene politically within existing institutions. It refuses to cede the emancipatory potential of communication in the contemporary public sphere.²⁰⁵ *Electronic Café* likewise problematized the presumed neutrality of various technologies of representation—linguistic, visual, technical, and otherwise—in order to elicit a conscious counterpublic refunctioning of productive and distributive tools.

Raising crucial questions about public life in the digital age, *Electronic Café* encouraged users to envision alternate arrangements of media control and enabled transgressive forms of public exchange. As Negt and Kluge explain, dominant publicity actively marginalizes nondominant groups by excluding them from its legitimizing power, which determines what can be said and how and whose experiences are considered relevant.²⁰⁶ A successful counterpublicity needs to work productively beyond the reproductive ideological mechanisms of inclusion–exclusion. Set against the conformism of technological consumption and the myth of inherently rebellious forms of collaboration through creative heterogeneity, *Electronic Café* brought users together specifically so that they could recognize the ways in which normative participation in the “freedoms” offered by current telecommunication practices actually facilitated their own marginalization. Mobile Image modeled a form of counterpublicity designed to upend this arrangement and the power sustained by it. As Gene Youngblood describes, the effects were profound:

The meetings became community events at which a great deal of serious discussion occurred among people who had never contemplated these possibilities before, and the identity of *Electronic Cafe* gradually emerged. Initial strategies included topics of discussion, solicitation of solutions to common problems, exchanges of cultural icons and symbols, translation of wit and wisdom from one language to another, photo dramas, collaborative pictorial creations, and various

games intrinsic to the visual and simultaneous drawing/writing components of the network. This participatory approach to the idea of “human design” is as much the point of *Electronic Cafe* as the network itself: for the first time in the history of electronic telecommunications, the identity of a large-scale, state of the art network issues from the vernacular language of indigenous culture, not the commodity jargon of corporate capitalism—an environment created and controlled by those who populate it.²⁰⁷

As a form of counterpublicity, *Electronic Café* facilitated instances of solidarity and reciprocity grounded in collective experiences of marginalization and exclusion. Yet, due to its particular setup—its mix of futuristic design and available technologies, commercial broadcast chatter and ad hoc creativity, uncharted electronic networks and familiar locales, prescribed cultural differences with experiences of common social concerns and myths of universal humanism with unexpected, historically specific needs—these instances were also highly reflexive. Participants were made aware of the mediated nature of their exchanges, of the fact that their communication was no longer rooted in traditional forms of social interaction and face-to-face relations, and that such exchanges were therefore subject to heightened evaluation, conflict, and negotiation.²⁰⁸

Galloway and Rabinowitz looked to the history of non- or pre-broadcast radio for related examples of critical and productive fantasy. They saw early amateur radio, for instance, as an archetype of politically effective, “utilitarian” communication technology. As Dieter Daniels explains, in the 1920s, radio was understood as having an “open, communicative, and networked structure,” by which hobbyists could meet and exchange ideas over the air.²⁰⁹ Here was a case of an emerging technology functioning as a highly localized tool serving the needs and future imaginings of particular publics. Whereas this function was soon superseded by centralized, mass distributed broadcast media, it survived into the later twentieth century within certain niche communities and served as a model for *Electronic Café*. As Galloway explains:

Cab drivers used radio, ham operators with their weird culture. They save people's lives, they do stuff. It's not like an artist doing things between here and there and sending something. These people are actually building the technology,

launching their own mini satellites, and saving drowning people. That's utilitarian. We wanted to bring that word into the role of the artist in the technological society also. You could do things that actually help people. So we were creating these models and saying try it, you'll like it. It's not here yet, and you can't perpetuate it. You can't replicate *Electronic Café* installations with a \$12,000 printer in each location. It's coming, get ready. Own this with your imagination so when the guy comes knocking on your door selling you a future, you kind of know what you want, rather than buying it. It was education.²¹⁰

Mobile Image's approach to space, place, and communication also resembled the more explicitly political "micro-radio" movement of the 1980s. As theorized by artist-activist Tetsuo Kogawa, micro-radio combined the technology's de-territorializing capabilities with a decidedly territorial conception of the public sphere, involving an arrangement of highly localized communication nodes—a revival of Brecht's famous call for a "vast network of pipes." Through workshops, written treatises, and instructional videos and manuals, Kogawa championed "narrowcasting" via inexpensive parts and weak airwaves initially meant for devices such as remote-control toys and wireless microphones. "Micro" here connotes not just small size, low power, and limited range—usually only a 100- to 500-meter radius—but also a "micro politics," in Felix Guattari's sense of the term, Kogawa explains, comprising a qualitatively different function of radio technology, one that "comes back to the authentic meaning of 'techne' the old Greek of art, that is hand-work." Kogawa imagined a critical and productive "polymorphous" micro-radio network made up of overlapping transmissions publicizing the varied needs and concerns—both common and divergent—of local communities made up of multifarious subjects. As he puts it, "Today, the notion of individual is too large, to say nothing of 'group' and 'people'. Inside the individual, many singularities are buzzing and expressing themselves. In order to respond to such singularities, we need micro and diverse medium."²¹¹

Both *Electronic Café* and Kogawa's micro-radio work had more in common with earlier radio-based political interventions than with seemingly like-minded ventures of the time—the largely privatized exchanges of "telematic" art, as well as other works of radio art that, as discussed in chapter 1, sought to materialize the mass media apparatus or use it as

a platform for distributed authorship or a source of readymade sound. *The Voice of Fighting Algeria* began in the mid-1950s, offering an alternative to the broadcasts of the French authorities and thereby giving rise to a shared anticolonial experience of solidarity. The radio, according to Frantz Fanon, begat the very possibility of a shared perspective, a fantasy of collective participation in liberation: “Having a radio meant paying one’s taxes to the nation, buying the right of entry into the struggle of an assembled people.”²¹² A revolutionary consciousness was built through what was being said and heard over the ether and through the exercise of the public sphere as a site of active and engaged contention. As if to underscore the ongoing battle, the audience had to work their way along the dial to find the station, whose operators were continuously trying to evade the authorities’ attempts to jam their frequency. Two decades later, the Italian “free radio” movement consisted of local stations occupying the public airwaves as a mechanism of subversive politics.²¹³ Bologna’s Radio Alice was one of the first and most overtly activist of these efforts, transmitting an anti-institutional, Dadaist mix of diverse content, including poetry, lectures, readings, music, talk, prank phone calls, live coverage of protests, and cooking recipes.²¹⁴ Envisioned as “an artistic object” in and of itself, the station sought to create a community of otherwise marginalized groups—student, feminist, queer, worker—by approaching radio not as a homogenizing force but rather, in the words of cofounder Franco Berardi, as a “point of intersection of different experiences.” In addition to its eclectic content, Radio Alice encouraged listeners to call in to the station and participate in the broadcast, opening radio to “the possibility of not only the circulation of information but also the circulation of struggle,” as Berardi explains.²¹⁵ Although it was relatively short-lived—it went on air in 1976 and was closed by authorities in 1977—the station inspired both Guattari’s call for “millions and millions of potential Alices”²¹⁶ and Kogawa’s plan for a polymorphous radio network soon after.²¹⁷

It is in relation to this context, and in connection to the utilitarian history of the radio referred to by Galloway, that the political edge of *Electronic Café* comes further into focus. And the ideas and notes compiled by Mobile Image and cited at the outset of this chapter have to be read as a dialectical inquiry into the politics of communications technology,

informing and informed by, applied and performed by the work. Akin to Guattari and Kogawa's micro-politics, *Electronic Café* consisted of the charged connections among publics—marginal, partial, dominant—in a process of self-conscious positioning, as reach and context, local and trans-local, drawing and redrawing the lines that describe the circumference of community, public, interest, common ground, and shared experience became a technical as well as sociopolitical charge. As part of this process, the artists' notes regarding "human scale–technological scale," "realities and virtual realities" assert and reveal themselves as activated negotiations rather than binaries. When Galloway and Rabinowitz inquire about "the democratic process," they do not seek more or different technical devices and know-how in order to afford greater access to the existing democratic process, its public sphere and its apparatuses; rather, technology becomes a tool for the exploration of the democratic process as such, as participation and agency in the struggle over production of situations and positions, knowledge and meanings, experiences and policies. To use Haraway's words, "Technologies are skilled practices. How to see? Where to see from? What limits to vision? What to see for? Whom to see with? Who gets to have more than one point of view? Who gets blinded? Who wears blinders? Who interprets the visual field? What other sensory powers do we wish to cultivate other than vision?"²¹⁸ The reflective performance of these questions as a creative process politicizes the stakes set by the artists at the outset of their project: "Transform individual intelligence and social effectiveness? . . . The real issue is that of allowing access to the whole picture of what is going on."

AFTERMATH

As the culmination of more than a decade of Mobile Image work, *Electronic Café* was above all an act of relating. It did not offer a blueprint for a better tomorrow kept at arm's length, the proverbial carrot in front of the cart, but instead a self-conscious, politicized fantasy via concrete, real-time acts of counterpublicity. Its implications were absorbed by many who experienced it, and, in the years since, artists and activists from the communities involved produced an array of like-minded and far-reaching

projects. Although varied in their objectives and techniques, these projects have critically engaged emergent commercial communication and networking technologies as sites of struggle, creating functional, participatory platforms for experiences of relationality. Heeded by some and overlooked by many, the lessons of *Electronic Café* became ever more urgent in a cultural context increasingly defined by the mass popularization of those technologies, fueled by entrenched myths of progress, expectations of progressive upheaval and transformation, and euphoric claims about an emergent electronic public sphere. Today, as platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) dominate social and political interaction, we reckon with the consequences of hyper-privatized public discourse. The drawing pads, tablets, and scanners of *Electronic Café* may now be obsolete, but the work's implications remain profoundly relevant.

Electronic Café had immediate and lasting impact on Ben Caldwell, the engineer-in-residence at the Gumbo House in South LA and a member of LA Rebellion, a loose collective of filmmakers that formed in the early 1970s. LA Rebellion combined avant-garde cinema techniques with imagery and narratives representing the pressing concerns and politics of marginalized communities.²¹⁹ By the mid-1980s, Caldwell had become interested in Brecht's ideas on communication and the political efficacy of technologies, and *Electronic Café* reinforced those ideas by modeling what Caldwell calls a "pedestrian" approach: "It doesn't have the helicopters and the police and everything around that makes it seem like this omnipotent thing. It's just a pencil, you know, that's all it is. And it showed people, it's just a pencil and you can use it." For Caldwell, *Electronic Café* opened up possibilities for productive communication and enabled him to "see in a network sense":

It blew me away. I thought "wow, this is the answer," because that's what I was interested in in filmmaking, is how can we emancipate our image, . . . the image of who we were . . . It was really another way to kind of look at busting down doors, so you could go to another neighborhood that you couldn't normally access and communicate directly, person to person, with them over this medium and exchange ideas and concepts. So I started working that way . . . The walk-in capacity of [*Electronic Café*] really made me see that we could be like doctors in the neighborhood, and we could take in clients right straight off the street and answer their needs. Whatever that need is,²²⁰

Later in 1984, Caldwell founded KAOS Network, a still-operational multimedia community production, training, and exhibition center located on a prominent corner in Leimert Park, a hub of Black art and culture in Los Angeles. The activities hosted at the center aim to demystify preexisting technologies and educate local residents on how to use them in alignment with their own objectives, connect with others inside and outside their communities, and think about the relationship of such technologies to seemingly all-powerful institutions and systems. In 1986, Caldwell inaugurated “I-Fresh Express,” a multi-year KAOS-based platform, involving projects designed to “pass on mass communications skills to black youth.”²²¹ In the decades since, KAOS has hosted numerous programs, from hip-hop open-mic sessions to multimedia exchanges between youths in Los Angeles and Cuba and South Africa. The recent *Leimert Phone Company* (2013) repurposed obsolete public pay phones to construct a neighborhood-wide network representing the voices and needs of the community (figure 3.26).²²² Although some of these projects have retained notions of democratization via technological know-how and access, others have more strategically redeployed existing technologies pointedly to engage the very processes of urban development and exclusion, the ongoing struggles over the participation in and production of relations, experiences, and policies.

Caldwell remained connected to Galloway and Rabinowitz, who themselves continued to build on the lessons of their previous work. In 1988, they founded Electronic Café International (ECI), a “permanent public telecommunications lab where we could connect with other people and build an international network,” as Rabinowitz put it.²²³ Housed at the 18th Street Arts Center in Santa Monica, California, ECI took advantage of the increasing availability of networking technologies; it was, for Mobile Image, the next logical step in “the creation of a virtual social commons where the convergence of intimate terminal space, public space, and virtual space comes together as an experience.” As they explain, “After the opening of the original *Electronic Cafe Network* in 1984 we felt that we had reached ‘the limits of models.’ All of our previous work begged to be developed. The next step was ‘community,’ a permanent multimedia collaborative public network. In 1988 ECI opened with its first international link with Paris.—ECI creates a networked lab, to support collaboration and



3.26

Leimert Phone Company, "Sankofa Red"
prototype outside KAOS Network, Leimert
Park, Los Angeles, 2013. Courtesy Ben
Caldwell.

co-creation between people in different cultures, countries and language groups.”²²⁴ As with the 1984 *Electronic Café*, visitors could experiment with emergent technologies and form new publics with people near and far, while the permanence of ECI allowed them to integrate those technologies into their lives more fully. Users could set up their first personal email account or schedule regular “virtual hangouts.” They could also form communities around like-minded interests and goals. In 1989, a group of regulars created Tele-Poetry, a videophone-based poetry network connecting ECI to venues in New York City, Boston, and eventually other locations in the United States and abroad. Artists and musicians also produced a range of multimedia “telecollaborative” performances and concerts via the network. By 1991, ECI had more than thirty networked affiliates in countries around the world, including Brazil, Denmark, Israel, Canada, France, and Japan.

Most poignantly, a series of explicitly political ECI activities emerged, projects that reminded users of broader contexts and their own positions within the network. Such activities revealed how certain tools can be wielded not only to create new artforms and construct new solidarities, new publics, but also to reimagine given technological arrangements of bodies, knowledge, place, and experience. In 1990, Ana Coria, an original *Electronic Café* community-outreach organizer, traveled to Nicaragua and set up a videophone connection between LA-based Nicaraguan-Americans and journalists and prominent Sandinista revolutionaries and author Omar Cabezas in an effort to both confront and subvert mass-mediated perceptions of South American politics and the people associated with them (figure 3.27).²²⁵ In 1991, Ulysses Jenkins produced *Bay Window: A Videophone Ritual Performance*, which linked together native Canadian communities in Western Front, Vancouver, and Baker Lake, Hudson Bay, with the Headlands Center for the Arts in Sausalito, California, ECI’s Santa Monica location, and the Exploratorium in San Francisco (figure 3.28). The event was designed to connect disparate indigenous communities to each other and to other marginalized groups, raise awareness about mutual concerns, and combine diverse modes of knowledge production and transference. It reorganized relationships between the supposedly traditional and the high tech and between various supposedly distinct “ethnic” identities, forms, and issues. The succession



3.27

Mobile Image, Electronic Café International, event with Omar Cabezas, Nicaragua, 1990. Courtesy Rabinowitz/Galloway Archive.

3.28

Ulysses Jenkins, *Bay Window: A Videophone Ritual Performance*, Jenkins (foreground, left) in San Francisco, conversing with a Native Canadian man (on screen) in Baker Lake, Canada, 1991. Courtesy Ulysses Jenkins.

of performances, storytelling, images, and discussions included footage from a live Miwok harvest ceremony, a political statement by a member of Southern California's Native American community, Spanish-language folk songs, a performance by the Collage Ensemble, a Los Angeles-based group of Japanese-American sound artists, the creation of a sand painting, a tribute to Anwar Sadat, a free-jazz performance, and a conversation on the planned construction of an open-pit uranium mine in Nunavut territory and the expected environmental impacts. Interspersed among these happenings were technical and logistical comments by operators of the network, feedback, visual and aural glitches, and the sound of modem signals, effectively materializing the mechanical apparatus. The following year, Caldwell and Jenkins produced *Video Phone to South Africa*, a three-way audio and video conference that connected local youths in Santa Monica and Oakland, California, with members of the ANC in South Africa. In 1994, ECI hosted "Café Barbie," an examination the doll's cultural significance by participants in Paris, New York, and Santa Monica.²²⁶

In their conception of art as laboratory for experimentation, education, and experiences of relationality, endeavors such as these and those at KAOS and other venues can, like the earlier work of Mobile Image, be understood in terms established by the historical avant-garde. Tools not typically used for artistic practice were similarly reconceived as such, with the goal of both enabling new connectivities or new symbols and converting those tools into functional means of social, political, and perceptual innovation. Aesthetic transformation would thus beget a new technics of aesthetics based on the needs of diverse publics continuously being formed and re-formed via technological networks. As Brecht explained, such an approach has the potential to alter the landscape of communication and knowledge production and the role of individuals within such networks radically, to "bring [them] into a relationship instead of isolating [them] . . . turning the audience not only into pupils but into teachers." Post-*Electronic Café* works such as those discussed above facilitated such experiences of relationality by redistributing communication tools according to temporary alliances formed around common concerns and needs, including the experience of exclusion and the mechanisms that separate the officially public from the presumably private.

This mode of artistic production distinguishes this legacy from what, at first glance, might seem to be like-minded participatory, technologically oriented art ventures that emerged around the same time. In 1986, for example, Carl Loeffler and Fred Tusk established ACEN (Art Comm Electronic Network), a dial-up BBS conceived as an “electronic gathering place” for the creation and dissemination of art projects and information.²²⁷ Such endeavors led to what Dieter Daniels terms “frameworks,” a series of electronic artist networks meant to serve as permanent infrastructures for open, text-based communication. Formed in the early 1990s, when personal computers and modems were becoming increasingly available but before the Internet became a true mass medium, these projects included *Public Netbase* in Vienna (1994), *Internationale Stadt Berlin* (1994) and, most notably, *THE THING* (1991), an international BBS network founded by Wolfgang Staehle in New York, with independent nodes soon after established throughout Western Europe. Conceived as high-tech versions of Josef Beuys’s notion of “social sculpture,” the frameworks attempted to realize, as Staehle put it, “Beuys’s idea of direct democracy, of a political community as a social structure.”²²⁸ These projects represented a utopian ideal of what Ries terms “pure sociality,” reflecting a euphoria over the possibility of limitless, autonomous communication.²²⁹

The frameworks paralleled what is commonly termed relational aesthetics, a group of contemporaneous, primarily “offline” practices that nonetheless adopted various networking paradigms of the moment—participation, communication, collectivity, sociality. In his theorization of the movement, Nicolas Bourriaud not only borrowed technological terminology such as “user friendliness” and “interactivity,”²³⁰ but also understood relational art as signifying “the changing mental space that has been opened for thought by the Internet, the central tool of the information age we have entered.”²³¹ Although he was determined to distinguish this movement from the art of the 1960s and 1970s, Bourriaud’s assertions recalled core claims made on behalf of conceptualism, emphasizing dematerialization, expanded participation, and a leveling of hierarchies.²³² Echoing Sol LeWitt, he considered the work of relational art “a machine for provoking and managing individual or collective encounters.”²³³ And whereas Bourriaud was convinced that utopian thinking was obsolete, he saw such artworks as “micro-utopias,” moments of

frictionless communalism, of open democratic exchange, built upon perceived commonalities.²³⁴

As critics have pointed out, however, this conception of art—like that of both earlier conceptualist practices and the concurrent framework networks—generally conforms to the logic of dominant systems, of a globalized economy built upon expanded communication.²³⁵ Gene Ray puts a finer political point on such critiques, arguing that Bourriaud’s micro-utopianism effectively enacts a “de-radicalization” of historical avant-garde politics, an abandonment of the “macro” aspiration to transform systems of social relations and overcome exploitation and domination.²³⁶

The most politically potent network-based works enable users to break free of those limitations by not only exchanging personal expressions and local concerns but also reaching beyond conventional institutions, situating themselves within broader struggles, and actively participating in those struggles. What distinguishes *Electronic Café* and works like it is a critical practice that is at once analytic, reflexive, and transformative, squarely aimed at effecting systemic change. This practice is itself an argument about, as Ray puts it, “the whole legacy—and so also the present and future—of the avant-garde project.” It has also become increasingly vital in the “Internet Age,” and especially with the rise of social media, by which individuals everywhere can broadcast their views, becoming so-called producers. Society is only now beginning to reckon with a technological apparatus dominated by a small group of corporations and characterized by widespread misinformation, distraction, privacy breaches, and election meddling. And yet, the potential to redeploy mass media tools on behalf of the marginalized or dispossessed remains, and certain artists and activists continue to use those tools to offer critical and productive fantasy as a subversive, mobilizing process for challenging current ideological and material arrangements, a generator of truly innovative communication.

Our point here is not to elevate Mobile Image above all others or advance simplistic notions of influence or credit. As discussed, *Electronic Café* was itself a collaboration, and some of its artists- and engineers-in-residence had already been involved with, and played a role in developing, the approaches epitomized by that landmark project. One of our primary objectives has been to sketch an art history that adds nuance to extant accounts of “art and technology”—including histories of new media and

digital art and much broader understandings of how art and politics relate to the tools by which they are brought into being. In such an art history, “communication” and “technology” are neither seen as inherently democratizing nor organized into symbolic displays of connectivity, of fabled transcendence, detached from material conditions and the historical specificities of the user and his or her context, the politics of time and territory. In this sense, we aim to follow the very methodology modeled by Mobile Image, entering into the historical record, the “community memory,” certain overlooked projects, perspectives, and narratives—art history as itself an act of counterpublicity. To varying degrees, the activities that succeeded *Electronic Café* were conceived as laboratories for the strategic repurposing of existing technologies on behalf of specific social needs—of fantasy, as Negt and Kluge understood it—grounded in historically rooted “situated knowledges” and the relationality of the public and the private. They attempted to generate new forms of knowledge and practice, new networks of bodies, information, place, and agency, via the *Umfunktionierung* of available tools.

Certainly, there are other artists and projects that we have not acknowledged, some with no connection to Mobile Image and yet no less worthy of study. What is most important is to underscore a particular approach, one that mobilizes fantasy to facilitate experiences of counterpublicity. In the contest over what and who are considered relevant, in the struggle over ownership, access, and authority and the quest for social transformation, the politicization of technology has the potential to redefine critical collective engagement. The works of Mobile Image involved self-conscious positioning and repositioning, as definitions of place, community, public, and interest were recast as technical as well as sociopolitical processes. Participants encountered not just novel devices but also substantive shifts in relationality in the ways in which communication and experience are organized through elaborate arrangements of tools and their use. Although largely overlooked by extant histories of art, these works and those like it have become ever more relevant. They provide crucial contributions to contemporary discourse, nuancing artistic categories such as “new media” and “social practice,” while also engaging broader political and ideological struggles facing a world of instant digital interaction, social media, and consolidated corporate control.

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The Future Is Present

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